

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

**Thursday, 30 September 2021**

**6.30pm to 10.00pm**

**Record of the meeting**

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

**Present:** Councillors: Kemp (Chairman), Barrett, Carr, Cooper, Sylvia Griffin, Hackwell, Howcroft-Scott, Johnson, Osborne, Purdy, Tejan, Thorne and Mrs Elizabeth Turpin

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

Clive Mailing (Roman Catholic Church representative) and Fay Cordingley (Church of England Representative)

**Added members without voting rights:**

Michael Lynch (Medway Youth Council Chairman)

**Substitutes:**

Councillors:  
Lammas (Substitute for Opara)  
Paterson (Substitute for Chrissy Stamp)

**In Attendance:**

Maria Beaney, Finance Business Partner, Education  
Kelly Cogger, Head of First Response and Targeted Services  
Lee-Anne Farach, Director of People - Children and Adults' Services  
Aeilish Geldenhuys, Head of Public Health Programmes  
Chris Kiernan, Assistant Director, Education and SEND  
Donna Marriott, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care  
Victoria O'Neill, Legal Advisor  
Teri Reynolds, Democratic Services Officer  
Paul Startup, Head of Corporate Parenting  
Sandy Weaver, Complaints Manager for Social Care

**324 Apologies for absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ahmed, Opara, Chrissy Stamp and from Carl Geurin-Hassett (Headteacher) and Sophie Turner (Healthwatch Medway).

**325 Record of meeting**

The record of the meeting held on 5 August 2021 was agreed and signed by the Chairman as correct.

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

There were none.

**327 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.

**328 Actions to reduce domestic abuse harms for children in Medway**

**Discussion:**

The Head of Public Health Programmes and the Head of First Response and Targeted Services introduced the report which provided Members with information on the interventions undertaken by the Council and its partners to reduce domestic abuse (DA) harms faced by children and young people.

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

- Early intervention – In response to a question about what was being done to provide early intervention support, officers explained that work was being done to address the gap that had existed previously in regard to this type of support. This included a community based service for perpetrators. In addition, from Key Stage 1 to 3, PSHE programmes in schools included teaching about healthy relationships, with a more targeted programme provided to children who were identified as at risk of exposure to domestic abuse of poor relationships.
- DART programme – in response to a concern about the future of this programme, Domestic Abuse, Recovering Together (DART), which had been delivered by the NSPCC previously, officers confirmed that the Council had bought the licence to continue to deliver the programme to eligible families in Medway.

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- Work with governors – in response to a suggestion that governors should be engaged with in relation to this issue, officers welcomed the suggestion and confirmed that when the new DA Co-ordinator took up post in November, this would be put to them as something to pick up.
- Role of the community and voluntary sector (CVS) – officers confirmed that there was a great deal of engagement with CVS organisations and confirmed that the main provider of DA services in Medway was a CVS organisation. It was also confirmed that the CVS were represented on the partnership board.
- Referrals – in a response to a question about why referral rates were lower in Medway than in Kent, officers confirmed that Medway's threshold for accessing services used to be only for victims at high risk of DA. The service had been recommissioned to meet the needs of medium risk victims, as well as high risk and last year the service saw a 92% increase in referrals and the service was now supporting a much wider cohort.
- Strategic analysis – in response to a question about whether this would be published, officers undertook to check and respond to Members.
- Accommodation – officers confirmed they worked closely with the housing service in providing suitable accommodation for victims. Where possible and safe to do so, families were supported to stay at home. Sometimes it was safer for victims to leave the home and refuges were commissioned for this purpose. The housing service were commissioning dispersed accommodation which would see accommodation, with visiting support, available across Medway to house victims and these properties were not obvious refuges.
- Support for CYP – it was asked how children that are subjected to or witnesses of DA were supported to not fall behind with their education and also how they were supported with their own emotional wellbeing. Officers confirmed that schools were notified of any pupil who has experienced or witnessed DA so the school and partner agencies could provide wrap around support for the child.

### **Decision:**

The Committee noted the report and proposed action by Council and partners and requested responses to questions not answered be provided via a briefing note.

**329 Complaints and Compliments Annual Report 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021**

**Discussion:**

The Children's Social Care Complaints Manager introduced the report which set out information on the complaints handled during 2020-2021. She highlighted the large reduction in complaints which could have been attributable to a change in use of language in assessments and the signs of safety approach involving families. The number of compliments had also increased.

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

- Complaints to the disability team – although there had been a rise in complaints relating to this team, it was explained that the rise was not statistically significant. However, it was acknowledged that learning was still taken from these complaints and it was also recognised what a difficult year that particular cohort of families had experienced in the pandemic.
- Demographics of complainants – comment was made in relation to the majority of complaints being received from white British and it was asked if this matched the demographics of the cohort of service users or whether this was a result of complaining being made easier for that particular ethnic group. It was explained that this was an area of concern for the Complaints Manager also, although she was able to report that there was an increasing number of Asian people making complaints.
- Attitudes/behaviour of staff – concern was raised about the number of complaints regarding attitudes and behaviour of staff. In response, the Complaints Manager explained that more work was being done in the service to build positive relationships and reflect on use of language. This had resulted in a large drop in complaints of this nature and was therefore an area that had greatly improved. It was also confirmed that only on two occasions had complaints been in relation to the same Social Worker.
- Communication – reference was made to the learning from complaints detailed in the report, particularly around answering emails and phone calls in a timely manner and the sharing of important information at initial placement, such as allergies and medication information. Concern was expressed that complaints had been received on such issues which were considered to be basic and also fundamental. In response, the Director of People agreed with this and ensured that staff strived to ensure this occurred. She added that the complaints were a reminder to staff of the importance of ensuring this happened at all times.

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- Benchmarking – it was asked if there had been any analysis with statistical neighbours to understand whether the drop in complaints was mirrored across other local authorities or was unique to Medway. The Director of People confirmed she had liaised with some statistical neighbours and although the reduction was a trend mirrored across other local authorities, it appeared to be greater in Medway, demonstrating the improvements made from the focus by the service in this area.
- First Response Team and Social Workers – it was asked if the complaints were balanced between agency and permanent staff. The Director of People confirmed that complaints regarding the First Response Team tended to be the highest in number as families in contact with the team often found it difficult to come to terms with the involvement of the service.
- Dealing with concerns – comment was made about the recording and learning from concerns raised with the service that may not become formal complaints, including concerns raised by Councillors. In response, officers explained that some other local authorities did report on MP/Councillor enquiries and that there was an opportunity to reconsider the learning from complaints and concerns, whatever the route by which the complainant uses.
- Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) – reference was made to the LGSCO not investigating complaints between March and June 2020. The Complaints Manager reassured Members that although the LGSCO did not investigate complaints during this period because of the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact those investigations would have had on local authorities, complaints were still able to be submitted and were added to a waiting list. She also explained that complaints to the LGSCO often took time and were at the end of a usually lengthy three stage statutory internal complaints process managed within the local authority.
- Advocacy service – a young person has to be offered an advocate when wanting to complaint, but were also support by an advocate for other areas such as in Child Protection Conferences or any other issues where they need or would like an advocate to help them express their feelings. It was not known why 18% did not want to engage, that information had been lifted from the Young Lives Foundation (YLF) annual report.
- Changes in Social Workers – it was confirmed some people did request a change in their social worker and requests usually came from parents

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and rarely from children. The service was always reluctant to change the social worker where they had built a good relationship with the child.

### **Decision:**

The Committee noted the report.

### **330 Annual Fostering Report**

#### **Discussion:**

The Head of Corporate Parenting introduced the report which set out the work completed by the service over the period April 2020 – 31 March 2021. He took the opportunity to recognise the hard work and commitment of Medway's Foster Carers over what had been an incredibly challenging time due to the Covid-19 pandemic. He also drew Members' attention to the review of the service, recruitment, training and development. He added that Medway was one of very few authorities that had a clear training offer for connected carers and that the service was currently piloting an enhanced out of hours service between 7-9pm, which would be further developed if well received.

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

- Foster to adopt – Officers confirmed that information about this would be covered comprehensively in the annual adoption service report.
- Retirement trends – in response to a question about the 22 Foster Carers who had chosen to end their services officers confirmed that some Foster Carers were retiring from the service and an event to celebrate their service was being held in October.
- Demographics – officers confirmed that the demographics of the foster carers, particularly with 65% being over the age of 55, matched the national picture and the service were working hard to attract a range of carers, including younger foster carers, however, this was always a challenge, recognised nationally. While some children were well placed with older foster carers, others were better placed with younger, more active carers and so the service was working on targeting younger people, including single people and same sex couples to try to better balance the demographic make up of Medway's foster carers.
- Recruitment campaigns – officers confirmed that it was too early to tell how well recruitment campaigns were working but confirmed one area the service was focusing more on was working harder to nurture initial enquirers and to follow those up when they don't initially materialise, as well as considering utilising those contacts in other ways, such as mentors for young people. It was also confirmed by officers that radio advertising was considered value for money.

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- ICT support – in response to a question about foster carers being supported with digital skills to enable them to best support children and young people, particularly with online learning as an example, officers confirmed that where there was a need, carers were supported in this way, along with the children. It was added that a lot of support groups had been better attended when held virtually because it was easier for carers to attend and so a blended approach to this would be undertaken going forward.

### **Decision:**

The Committee noted the report and requested their comments be included in the report when presented to the Cabinet.

### **331 Medway Council Education Strategic Framework**

#### **Discussion:**

The Assistant Director, Education and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) introduced the report which provided two documents, namely the Medway Education Strategy and the Medway School Effectiveness Strategy. The documents would form part of a strategic framework for Education in Medway. He explained that the documents provided clarity around the role of the local authority (LA) in relation to education. The documents were draft and the Committee was asked to comment and recommend them to the Cabinet for approval.

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

- Voice of the child – concern was raised that the documents did not demonstrate enough the voice of children and young people or their input in shaping the strategies. Equally it was stated that the documents didn't recognise enough the diversity of Medway. In response officers accepted these points and that more needed to be done around the child's voice going forward, recognising that covid had been a factor that had made this more difficult.
- School location – the point was made that ideally every child should have a primary school within 1.5 miles from their home. Officers confirmed that although this was ideal and an aspiration for children, it wasn't always possible due to land availability.
- Purpose of the strategies – in response to a question about the purpose of the documents and what the public would gain from them, officers confirmed that they provided clarity around the Council's role in relation to education provision in Medway and that the framework would work

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towards a more effective, efficient, and equitable provision across Medway.

- Places for out of area children – concern was raised about out of area children taking up places in Medway schools, primarily selective schools. Officers confirmed that it was unlawful to set admission policies that always favoured local children over children from other boroughs. He added that Medway schools were compliant with the Schools Admission Code and they were admitting pupils on distance thereby providing Medway children with a greater prospect of gaining a place, unless children were just outside the Medway border or were able to meet higher aspects of oversubscription criteria, such as sibling links. It was added that Key Stage 2 performance still needed to improve and as and when it does, more Medway children would reach the pass mark of the Medway test and thereby gain a place at a Medway grammar school.
- Partnership working with the diocese boards – it was recognised that the diocese boards had a part to play in supporting schools who were not performing to expected standards and could work in partnership with the LA and were welcomed to better engage in the Medway Education Partnership Board.
- Governors – in response to a question about dialogue between the LA and school governors, officers confirmed that this had been something the LA needed to do more of, and governor meetings were being started up again later in the term. These would be organised by governors and supported by the LA as it felt this would be the most successful method of maximum engagement and outcome.
- Medway Test – comment was made about whether Medway could require parents to opt their children out of taking the test, as opposed to opting in. Officers raised concerns about the legal possibilities of this but undertook to investigate.
- Home-schooling – it was confirmed that when a parent chooses to home school their child the legal responsibility around that child's education falls to them and the LA had no right to intervene if the family did not wish to access support.

### **Decision:**

The Committee recommended the Cabinet to approve the Education Strategic Framework, as detailed within the strategies attached at Appendix 1 and 2 of the report.

### 332 High Needs Block Recovery Plan

#### Discussion:

The Assistant Director, Education and SEND introduced the report which set out the Council's recovery plan to address the High Needs Block (HNB) deficit. The High Needs Block was one of the four main blocks of funding of the Dedicated Schools Grant and provided funding for pupils requiring high levels of educational need and/or disability. It was explained that the HNB was under pressure in most Councils

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

- Graduated approach, banding system and ceasing non-EHCP top ups – extra information was requested on these particular strands of the recovery plan. Officers explained that these three areas were not significant in terms of addressing the deficit but were significant in making the whole system fairer.
  - The graduated approach was to ensure all schools are clear on what they needed to do before getting additional support from the HNB via an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). It may reduce EHCPs slightly but would make the system fairer.
  - The banding system – this would be an extension of the graduated approach and would set out clearly what the needs need to be identified as, when they sit in a different band. Implementation of this had been delayed due to the pandemic but it was due to be implemented in April 2022. It was acknowledged a banding system had previously existed but had been ambiguous and not consistently applied across Medway schools.
  - Non-EHCP top ups – these had been where the Council had funded schools for a particular need to avoid an EHCP. However, this had largely failed as the schools often then continued with an EHCP referral. Therefore there was an effort to greatly reduce these top ups and for them only to be use in exceptional circumstances where a child needs short term additional support.
- Government assistance – Members were very supportive of the local authority approach central Government for additional funding and support to meet the growing demand and pressure. Officers confirmed that they had met with the Education and Skills Funding Agency, along with the Chief Finance Officer and had been very firm and clear about the difficulties faced by the Council and the inadequate funding being provided by Central Government. It was added that the local MPs were also lobbying on behalf of the Council
- Timescales for EHCPs – concern was raised with regard to the length of time it takes in putting an EHCP in place for a child and the impact on

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the funding available for that child and therefore the resources available to them in school. Officers confirmed that EHCPs were usually done within 26 weeks and that if the schools were reasonably unable to provide additional support to a child before an EHCP is put in place then the Council would still provide top-up funding in such cases.

- Monitoring of the delivery plan – officers assured the Committee that the delivery plan was being tightly monitored by the Leader of the Council, Chief Finance Officer, Chief Executive, Director of People and other senior staff in the education division.
- Schools Forum – it was confirmed that the deficit was the responsibility of the Council and not the Schools Forum, however, the Schools Forum was well briefed on the issue and had been supportive in agreeing the top slice funding.

### **Decision:**

The Committee noted the report.

### **333 Council Plan Performance Monitoring and Risk Register Review Quarter 1 2021/22**

### **Discussion:**

The Director of People introduced the report which set out how the Council had performed on the delivery of two priority areas relevant to the Committee for the first quarter of 2021-22. Officers drew Members' attention to the indicators that were red including:

- excess weight – officers explained that there was a long term whole system approach in place to address this measure, which was a focus for the Council and a number of partner agencies, not least the NHS.
- Number of days between a child entering care and moving in with an adoptive family – officers explained this was slightly improved and was a figure significantly affected by sibling groups and children who were older or who had complex needs. Covid had also impacted this measure due to delays in the Court process.
- S47 and S17 assessment visits – there had been a drop in performance during quarter 1 which related to a small number of families and was attributable to the availability of families as well as partners (particularly over the summer holiday period) and to some vacancies in the assessment team.
- Children Social Care audits – officers explained this was a stretching target and a part of the improvement journey. Small improvements were being made but work was ongoing in this area.
- Persistent absence – officers explained that this was largely attributable to covid and the way a child's absence is marked depending on whether

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they were absent because of isolating due to being in contact or because they had covid themselves. It was also reiterated that the figures provided were unvalidated figures.

- Young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) – officers explained that despite the red, performance in this area had been very good, particularly as the number of un-knowns (where a child's destination in terms of EET was un-known) had dramatically reduced. Equally the percentage for Medway, although above national, was below the average for the South East. The pandemic had also been a factor in being a barrier for some NEETs to access employment, education or training.

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

- Smoking at time of delivery – it was suggested that this target be reviewed to be a more stretching target.
- Number of days between a child entering care and moving in with adoptive family – in response to a question about how this was calculated officers confirmed this was the longest period of time measured and was from when the child entered care to when they go to live with an adoptive family. Other measures were taken around time to match etc but these were reported elsewhere and not part of the Council Plan Monitoring data set.
- Underweight children – Members asked to receive information in relation to children who were underweight in Medway, which officers undertook to provide.
- Unknowns – despite the large reduction in the percentage of children whose destination was unknown, Members still raised concern in relation to the children left. Officers recognised that but explained that the majority of the young people were likely to have moved out of area. There was a national system to track the information but there would always be a small number of children who would be difficult to track due to moving locations as an example.
- Be Yourself Project – Reference was made to the project, which provided additional support for young people around employability, education and training, and whether an extension to the project beyond October had been agreed. Officers undertook to report back to members with an update.
- Weight management programme – in response to a request for more detail on this, officers explained that this was a programme delivered though Public Health and children were mainly referred into the service as a result of the outcome of the national child measurement

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programme. Families could also self refer and Public Health worked with a wide range of partners to raise awareness and support appropriate referrals. The aim for children and families at the end of the programme is for them to be more active and eat more healthy and for at least 75% of the children and young people completing the programme to achieve that.

- Number of children on a Child Protection Plan per 10,000 – in response to a question about whether this target was set at the right value, officers explained that Medway was still on its improvement journey and were yet to determine exactly where the target should be. The service had worked hard to address drift and delay in this area but there was expected to be more movement of the numbers before settling as improvement is continued.

### **Decision:**

The Committee noted the response.

### **334 Work programme**

#### **Discussion:**

The Democratic Services Officer introduced the report which set out the work programme for the committee. She confirmed that persistent absence was listed on the work programme with a date for that item yet to be determined. Suggestion was also made for the Committee to receive a report on Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and the work that has taken place in relation to this area.

#### **Decision:**

The Committee agreed the work programme as set out at Appendix 1 to the report.

**Chairman**

**Date:**

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