

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

Thursday, 3 March 2022

6.30pm to 10.46pm

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), Barrett, Carr, Sylvia Griffin, Howcroft-Scott, Johnson, Lammas, Osborne, Purdy, Tejan, Tranter and Mrs Elizabeth Turpin

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

Clive Mailing (Roman Catholic Church representative) and
Lenny Willams (Church of England Diocese Representative)

Added members without voting rights:

Victoria Aspin (Teacher Representative), MYC Chairman
(Medway Youth Council) and Carl Guerin-Hassett (Headteacher
Representative)

Substitutes: Councillors: Adeoye and Van-Dyke

In Attendance: Councillor Josie Iles, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services
(Lead Member)
Councillor Martin Potter, Portfolio for Holder Education and
Schools
Lee-Anne Farrach, Director of People, Children and Adults
Donna Marriott, Assistant Director Children's Social Care
Celia Buxton, Assistant Director Education and Send
David Whiting, Public Health Consultant
Ken Dance, Youth Offending Team Manager
Stephanie Davis, Democratic Services Officer

710 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence was received from Cllrs Cooper, Stamp and Thorne.

711 Record of meeting

The record of the meeting held on 6 January 2022 was agreed and signed by the Chairman as correct

712 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were none.

The Chairman welcomed Victoria Aspin, Teacher Representative and Lenny Williams, the Church of England Diocese representative who join the Committee as Co-opted Members.

713 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests or Other Significant Interests and Whipping

Disclosable pecuniary interests

There were none.

Other significant interests (OSIs)

There were none.

Other interests

In relation to item 5, Councillor Opara disclosed that her business had been involved with and benefitted from the Kickstart scheme. Her business has a partnership with CXK.

714 Attendance of Portfolio Holder for Education and Schools

Discussion:

Councillor Martin Potter, Portfolio Holder for Education and Schools was in attendance and took questions from the Committee.

Members raised several questions and comments which included:

- **Workforce** – a question was raised on what measures had been taken to ensure that the teaching workforce on term time only contracts received the settlements they deserved through the annual pay award. The Portfolio Holder said that negotiations with the GMB was ongoing, and an agreement had been reached with Unison. It was important to maintain political agreement on issues as complex as pay.

It was highlighted that Medway Council was not engaging in training of Newly Qualified Teachers (NQT) and it was asked what impact this would have on retention of staff. It was alluded that this may (might)

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 3 March 2022

have had an impact on the number of NQTs that successfully completed their induction in 2020/21. The Portfolio Holder said that Medway had no provision in place as a training provider as they would have to partner with a university to ensure availability of expertise for delivery of training programmes.

- **Schools COVID Recovery** – in response to a question on what steps were being taken to stabilise the workforce post COVID, the Portfolio Holder stated that the Council continued to work closely in partnership with headteachers and school leaders to discuss issues and provide support.
- **COVID Recovery Spend** – it was asked what was being done by schools on COVID recovery extra provision for pupils. The Portfolio Holder said that the decision on utilisation of the additional catch-up funding was left to individual schools. One of the schemes that was currently in place was a Medway wide literacy scheme to address issues with literacy which had been identified as a national cause for concern. The outcome of schools working together and sharing best practice through a system led programme that was not directed by the Council was yet to materialise but the work to date was encouraging.
- **Assessments** – in response to concerns raised regarding assessments in primary schools which had not taken place since the pandemic, the Portfolio Holder assured members that the focus and aspiration were to return as soon as permissible to a stage of resuming assessments as the data currently in use was 2019 data which was extremely out of date.
- **Mental Health Practitioners** – in response to a question on the impact the eight mental health practitioners that were being trained and would be based at schools across Medway would have, the Portfolio Holder said that it was too soon to provide a detailed answer. The possibilities were however welcomed, and it was encouraging that practitioners would be based in schools at the frontline working directly with teachers and providing support to children and young people.
- **School Transport** – it was challenged that responsibility for payment of school transport to the temporary Maritime Academy site in Stoke should not lie with the Council and responsibility should lie with the Department for Education in this instance. The Portfolio Holder stated that the school should already be open and there had been delays due to various complex issues. The situation as it stood was to commence provision at a temporary site, which was the best solution for children and prevented putting pressure on schools to make provision through bulge classes which would have incurred higher costs to the Council.

It was asked if Looked after Children (LAC) were included in the 1337 children that had been assessed as eligible for school transport. Officers said that all LAC children were assessed for transport and were included in the figures in the report.

- **Support for Eastern European Children** – in response to what support was being provided, the Portfolio Holder stated that it was still early days in terms of response, but provision would be made available to ensure school provision for children where necessary. There was support in place for children in schools affected by the events that were taking place. The school's forum would be a place to discuss all issues and responses as they arose.
- **Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET)** – it was asked what impact the Kickstart programme aimed at 16–25-year-olds on Universal Credit at risk of long-term unemployment had on young people of Medway and how many had benefitted from the programme. The Portfolio Holder stated that the skills team, youth service and education all worked with NEET and strategic work was being done to integrate those services. Detailed work was underway to tackle the issues of high NEET instances amongst young people in various ways such as events for care leavers, careers advice and training events. It was suggested that the leader of the skills team should provide a briefing note to the Committee on the work of the scheme.

The Vice - Chair thanked the Portfolio Holder for his attendance and engagement with Members.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report.

715 Attendance of Portfolio Holder for Children's Services (Lead Member)

Discussion:

Councillor Josie Iles, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services was in attendance and took questions from the Committee.

Members raised several questions and comments which included:

- **Children's Improvement Plan** – it was asked what assurance could be given of the department's ability to sustain the improvements made to date now that it was no longer subject to monitoring of Special Education and Disabilities (SEND). The Portfolio Holder stated that whilst sufficient progress had been achieved which resulted in no longer being subject to monitoring visits, they would continue to receive support as well as appropriate challenge where necessary. It would be an ongoing process through various work streams to sustain progress such as sustained support to the parents' and carers' forum and continued review of practices.

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 3 March 2022

- **High Needs Block Deficit** – it was challenged that the Committee had been assured six months ago through a detailed report on tackling the high needs deficit and was now being advised that this could not be resolved. It was asked what was being done to hold the department to account on the Ten-year recovery plan. The Portfolio Holder stated that the report was clear that the forecast did not turn out as expected, was being reviewed and would form part of the SEND Strategy that would be presented to the Committee at its next meeting. Officers added that the report detailed why the high needs recovery plan would not meet its forecast targets. The service continued to experience pressure such as increased specialist provision which incurred high costs as well as increased children with EHC plans. The expected percentage in growth in High Needs funding over the next 10 years would be significantly lower than forecasted, and the current plan would not resolve the deficit issue in 10 years. To maintain the current plans forecast, annual growth would need to be reduced by 50% and this was not a viable option.
- **Data** - it was highlighted that one of the concerns of the Ofsted monitoring visits in 2021 and in the latest report was that the electronic reporting system introduced in April 2021 was not accurately recording data and the Portfolio Holder was asked how confident she was in its accuracies. The Portfolio Holder stated that as far as she was aware the data was accurate and had to be looked at alongside the commentary provided which explained any variances. Officers added that the issue with data was complex. A new system was put in place in April 2021 and the introduction of the forms with the practice model which mapped through the system meant that the system would need to be reworked and mapped for a considerable amount of time to ensure its efficiency and accuracy. If data presented with any anomalies, they were addressed as they were recognised, and changes were built into the system as appropriate. Ofsted used a different reporting tool and the data tool they used at the time of inspection highlighted some inaccuracies. The data team was aware of and worked to address those issues. These types of problems were consistent with the implementation of a new system which took time to work through.
- **Workforce and Recruitment** – in response to a question on what further intervention could be put in place to address workforce issues, the Portfolio Holder stated that recruitment and retention of staff was a national issue. The pandemic had a great impact on an area which had already been problematic for Local Authorities across the country. The department was continuously exploring different strategies to manage the market and ensure provision was in place to meet the needs of children through a robust workforce.

It was asked how many of the social workers that had been recruited from overseas were still with the department. Officers said that 12 social workers had been recruited and were all still in post. The possibility of overseas recruitment remained an option.

- **Exclusions** - in response to Members' concerns about the high instances of exclusion rates in Medway, the Portfolio Holder stated that they were working on an action plan in the Corporate Parenting subgroup to explore various ways of tackling this issue.
- **Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) Wait List** - a concern was highlighted that 66% of children received their EHCP within 20 weeks, officers stated that the National average for receipt of EHCP within 20 weeks was 52%. The SEND strategy that was being worked on would seek to address access to provision for children and young people and resources that could be put in place whilst they were waiting for assessment. The Draft strategy would be presented to the Committee at its next meeting.

In response to a question on the high instance of refusal rates for ECHPs which was evident nationally and concern on what could be done to better support parents with their application, Officers said that the refusal rates were around 50/60% as not all children met the threshold. Parents and Carers had the right to make an application for support and further work needed to take place to support parents in their abilities to submit clear, detailed applications.

The Vice - Chair thanked the Portfolio Holder for her attendance and engagement with Members.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report.

716 Medway Youth Justice Plan 2022-24

Discussion:

The Youth Offending Team Manager introduced the report which set out priorities and arrangements for the next two years to ensure continued delivery of the Youth Justice Partnership across Medway.

Members raised several questions and comments which included:

A comment was made that following a visit to the service and learning more about the work that was being carried out, the priorities around issues with identity were striking. The work being done to support young people in understanding social context and forging their own identity amidst deep issues of social anxiety was commendable.

- **Budget** - it was commented that the budget for the service had increased significantly but the number of young people being supported remained relatively low. The officer stated that the cohort of young people supported was fluid. At present 70 young people were being

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 3 March 2022

supported. All of them had extremely complex and challenging needs hence the increase in the budget.

- **Data** - concern was raised at the data presented which was 12 months old and it was questioned how records and tracking could be maintained with data sets that were out of date. The officer stated that the re-offending data was produced by the Youth Justice Board which had a complex system of gathering and tracking data from the National data set. The issue with data was a concern for all partners and was a regular topic of discussion at the local level.
- **Female Offenders** – in response to questions regarding the lack of targeted support for female offenders despite a request for a Girls' Strategy at the time of inspection and a lack of intervention for girls in alternative pathways away from crime, the officer acknowledged that most of the intervention in place was targeted towards male offenders. Whilst instances of reoffending in the female population were low, it was agreed that more intervention and a responsive approach to tackle female offending or reoffending was needed.
- **LGBT** – the lack of representation of intervention for LGBT offenders in the report was referenced and the officer acknowledged this and said that the National data tool did not capture data by LGBT offenders, this had been raised with the inspectorate.
- **Referrals** – in response to a question on what the solution should be to address a lack of referrals when the police took no further action against a young person, the officer said that low referral rates were an issue that the partnership board closely monitored. The service was trying to identify why the police had a low referral rate and find ways to build relationships and encourage them to refer when they were not taking action against young people.

Decisions:

1. The Committee noted the report.
2. The Committee recommended the Cabinet to recommend Full Council to approve the Medway Youth Justice Partnership Strategic Plan 2022 – 2024 attached at Appendix 1 to the report, including its priorities and themes and details of its consultation process (attached at Appendices 1 and 2 to the Strategic Plan).

717 Children's Service Improvement Update

The Assistant Director Children's Social Care introduced the report which provided a progress update on children's improvement activity with specific reference to progress made against the Children's Improvement Plan.

Members raised several questions and comments which included:

Members praised the positive progress that had been made by the service as evidenced in the Ofsted letter that was published on 1 March 2022 and all staff were thanked for their hard work, commitment, and dedication to improving outcomes for children, young people, and families of Medway. It was important for staff to recognise and celebrate their success.

- **Recruitment** - in response to concerns on the impact of recruitment on the early intervention improvement priorities, the officer said that an action plan was in place to mitigate issues experienced in recruitment. Recruitment in social care remained a problem that was not limited to social worker posts and the impact meant that families had to wait longer for assessment which was why the service was focused on short term intervention work, and partnership work, in particular with schools to mitigate the issues experienced as a result of recruitment.

The officer added that there was significant investment in the principle social work team, with investment on the development of staff by exploring ways to best support officers currently in post.

The recruitment market for social work posts remained significantly challenging despite investment and appropriate remuneration. There needed to be a stronger National drive by the Department for Education to tackle nationwide problems with recruitment of social workers.

- **Staff Reference Group** – in response to a question on the frequency of meetings, types of issues raised and how they were addressed, the officer said that group sessions occurred frequently. Staff used the forum to openly discuss and raise a different range of concerns and a quarterly event was being set up by the leadership team to evidence the actions taken against the concerns highlighted by staff.
- **Quality Assurance** – it was asked how often audit of cases took place and the officer responded that the service had a monthly audit programme in place. In addition, this was supplemented with a random comprehensive sampling of different cases. If data determined that records needed to be looked at further, sample audits would be carried out. The department had recently secured funds for extra audit capacity.

In response to a question of clarification about the six month review process, the officer stated that this was an independent review of a child's plan which took place with the child's family and explored permanence outcomes. According to the inspectors, this could be done

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 3 March 2022

better by exploring outcome at the outset of the child's plan. This comment had been taken on board alongside all the other comments and what could be done better to improve the service.

- **Eden House** – Members were informed that Eden house, a home for children with complex needs with a capacity for four children was now open with three young people in residence. The children all had their own individual plan on a 16-week programme with different types of intervention with wrap-around care tailored to their individual needs and good progress was being made.

The Director of People, Children and Adults informed the Committee that the next Ofsted visit would take place in May 2022 and the focus of that visit would be on care leavers. Medway should expect its Inspecting Local Authority Children's Service (Ilacs)'s inspection might take place by spring 2023.

The Committee was thanked for their input, comments, and feedback as part of the Improvement Journey.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report.

718 Council Plan Performance Monitoring Report and Risk Register Quarter 3 2021/22

The report which summarised the Council's performance against delivery of its priorities was introduced and Members raised several questions and comments which included:

A concern regarding the mechanics behind the changes in targets was highlighted in particular regarding Ilacs 7. The comments made were noted by the Director of People who stated that there was nuance associated with that target.

- **Risk** – it was asked when the risk for the 10-year High Needs Block Deficit Strategy downgrade occurred. The officer said the risk report was updated in January 2022 when the risk was downgraded as part of the high needs review and intervention that would be put in place. The full details would be shared as part of the full SEND Strategy report that would be presented at the next meeting of the Committee
- **Attendance in schools** – concern was raised that 1 in 4 secondary school pupils in Medway was persistently absent. Officers clarified that persistence absence was absence below 90%, the data presented had not been updated since the last quarter and was data for terms 1-4 of 2020/2021 during the height of the pandemic. Medway had a higher percentage of absence related to COVID compared to National average. A fuller report would be provided once after term 4's data release were

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 3 March 2022

made available. Internal monitoring of attendance occurred through data provided by schools by choice and the data showed that Medway's current attendance was below National Average.

- **Breast Feeding Target** – targets were affected by the pandemic and NHS staff; and it was asked what further information in respect of peer support work could be provided as the trends appeared to be worsening. The officer said the indicator was red for Quarter 3 largely due to the impact of COVID across staffing across all NHS organisations. Quarter 4 could also remain red but should reduce back to green by Quarter 5. There were other measures and a summary of those figures would be provided to the Committee as a briefing. It was difficult to determine the driver behind the impact as this was still being explored to identify if there were a cohort of children with lower rates of breastfeeding which would highlight the reasons behind the impact.
- **Healthy Weight Summit** – it was asked how the healthy eating and cooking programmes could be extended across the community. The officer said a range of courses took place at different locations and he would come back to Members about capacity to run other courses in other places.
- **Cyber Security** - this remained an area of great concern and should remain a priority. It was asked that a training session be organised to which officers agreed.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report.

719 Work Programme

The Democratic Services Officer introduced the report and drew the Committee's attention to the upcoming Local Government Association Training that would take place on 22 March 2022. Members were reminded to notify democratic services of their availability to attend the training day.

A Member requested that an item be brought at a future meeting on workforce and recruitment planning for in- depth scrutiny. This was agreed by the Chairman, Members of the Committee and Officers.

Decisions:

1. The Committee agreed the work programme as set out at Appendix 1 to the report.
2. The Committee agreed that a paper be brought to a future meeting on workforce and recruitment.

Chairman

Date:

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