

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

Thursday, 29 September 2022

6.30pm to 9.58pm

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, Cooper, Howcroft-Scott, Johnson, Osborne, Purdy, Tejan, Thompson, Tranter, Mrs Elizabeth Turpin and Van Dyke

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

Clive Mailing (Roman Catholic Church representative), Lenny Willams (C of E Diocese Representative, Rochester Diocesan Board of Education) and Akinola Edun (Parent Governor Representative)

Added members without voting rights: None

Substitutes: Councillor: Nusrat Ahmed (Substitute for Sylvia Griffin)
Keith Clear (Substitute for Lisa Scarrott)

In Attendance: Samantha Beck-Farley, Chief Organisational Culture Officer
Celia Buxton, Assistant Director, Education and SEND
Stephanie Davis, Democratic Services Officer
Lee-Anne Farach, Director of People - Children and Adults' Services
Michelle Pink, Customer Relations Manager
David Reynolds, Head of Revenue Accounts
Julia Thomas, Senior Public Health Manager
James Williams, Director of Public Health
Sandy Weaver, Complaints Manager for Social Care

246 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Carr, Griffin and Thorne.

Apologies for absence were also received from Georgina Bentaleb and Victoria Aspin.

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 29 September 2022

247 Record of meeting

The record of the meeting held on 28 July 2022 was agreed and signed as correct by the Chairman.

248 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were none.

249 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 disclosed an interest on agenda items 6 and 10 as she is a Governor at Rivermead School

Councillor Kemp disclosed an interest on agenda item 6 as he is a Governor at Abbey Court School.

Councillor Mrs Elizabeth Turpin disclosed an interest in agenda items 6 and 7 as she has a child with SEND.

250 Complaints and Compliments Annual Report 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022

Discussion:

The Complaints Manager for Social Care introduced the report which provided information on children's services complaints handled during 2021–2022. The report also highlighted the positive comments received on provision of children's services and improvements made by Medway Council.

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

The report was commended for being comprehensive and the addition of the compliments section was welcomed, as it was encouraging to see the comments made by the public on the work of the departments, special guardians and foster carers.

Complaints Process – in response to comments that the complaints process would benefit from a review as more flexibility was needed in dealing with each case, as not all complaints were necessarily complaints, officers said that the

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 29 September 2022

procedure was a statutory process that was based on the regulation of the Children's Act that was developed in 2006 including the timeline. It was agreed that a degree of flexibility would be beneficial in certain cases and the ability to resolve in a timely manner. Managers were proactively resolving issues before they went through a formal complaints stage.

The Director of People added that managers and senior leadership were expected to acknowledge receipt of complaints immediately and ensure that complaints were resolved as quickly as possible. There was currently 100% completion rate within children's services.

Increase in Upheld Complaints – it was noted that the number of complaints fully or partially upheld had increased and it was asked what the reasons behind this was. Officers said that managers were attempting to solve complaints and concerns before reaching a formal stage. In the past, complaints could have been resolved without going through a formal process and this had been recognised by managers who were communicating with service users and resolve issues where possible. Formal complaints received were likely to be upheld and likely to have gone through an ombudsman process.

Lessons Learnt - it was asked how lessons learnt from complaints as well as compliments were fed back to staff. Officers said that reports were sent to the Quality Assurance team who were able to triangulate and provide information to Heads of Service who were expected to hold discussions with staff. It was hoped that in the near future, workshops could be resumed where social workers could come together to share practice and learn from each other.

The Director of People added that staff newsletters were utilised as a means to highlight practice issues which was vital in an environment with high staff turnover. It was also used to regularly feedback compliments received.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report.

251 Joint Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Strategy 2022-25

Discussion:

The Assistant Director, Education and SEND introduced the report which set out the draft updated Joint Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Strategy which included the vision, guiding principles and the key areas of development that will be Medway's focus for children and young people with SEND over the coming three years.

Members were informed that the consultation closed on 23 September 2022 and the information gathered would be incorporated to the final Strategy Action Plan where appropriate.

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 29 September 2022

120 responses were received with 280 individual comments. The three key things highlighted by respondents were the need for increased effective communication between agencies, parents, and carers, streamlining of pathway processes and ensuring the voice of the child, parents and carers were central to decision making.

Members commented that the Strategy was robust but questioned deliverability and what was in place to mitigate issues. The Assistant Director of Education and SEND said that there was a deliverability plan that had been developed and would be shared once finalised.

Transitions - in response to a question on distinct issues on the transition pathway from children to adults' service and what could be done to improve experiences and outcomes, the Officer acknowledged the issues and said that this was an area of continued focus. Specialised work had commenced on joining up the children and adults service in order to improve pathways.

Inclusion and Participation - it was commented that in order to achieve best outcomes through inclusion and participation, it was important to emphasise to third party organisations that their provision must be non-discriminatory. The officer agreed and said that this was a joint strategy that focused on changing culture in Medway and as such it was important to get the message across on promotion of inclusivity.

Communication – in response to a question on what was being done to improve communication between services and families, the officer said that improvement was needed in clearness of communication to families. Work was being done to streamline processes, make them more effective and improve confidence in the system by being clear on eligibility and legislation.

Flexibility – it was asked what opportunities there were for flexibility in response to individual circumstances. The Officer said that SEND was a regulatory arena that was restricted by several factors such as budgets, provision, parental choice, all these factors impact flexibility in the service.

EHCP Applications – it was questioned why a high number of EHCP applications were rejected. The officer acknowledged that a high number were refused, this was due to applications received from parents that had not received any input from education providers and were not aware of processes and eligibility. This had been recognised and work was being undertaken to support parents on how and when to approach for support.

Abbey Court – in response to comments regarding the issues with children not being able to attend school every day and the pressure that put on families, the Officer acknowledged the issues at Abbey Court. Members were informed that children that attended the school had complex issues which meant that they needed specialist qualified staff to support them. There was however a shortage of specialist staff which had impacted on the ability for the school to provide services daily. The situation was being reviewed on a regular basis and

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 29 September 2022

resources were put in place to support families whilst solutions were sought to address recruitment issues.

Decision:

- a) The Committee noted the Draft Joint SEND Strategy 2022-25
- b) The Committee noted that the Strategy would be updated following the completion of the Safety Valve Intervention Programme (SVIP) and the outcome of formal consultation

252 Update on the Safety Valve Intervention Programme

Decision:

Following discussions with the Chair, Vice Chair and Opposition Spokesperson it was suggested that this item be deferred to a future meeting to allow for accurate information to be presented to the Committee.

The Committee agreed for this item to be deferred.

253 Workforce Recruitment and Retention

Discussion:

The Chief Organisational Culture Officer introduced the report which provided an update on recruitment and retention and set out the challenges facing Medway and set out the national context.

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

Overseas Recruitment Programme - it was asked whether the Council continued its overseas recruitment programme and what percentage of social workers were retained. The Officer said that 80% of the staff recruited were retained and whilst the programme had been successful, there has been many associated challenges. At this time this was not being looked at as an option to stabilise the workforce.

It was commented that a stable workforce was crucial to the improvement journey, and it was worrying that the situation, which was not limited to Medway was deteriorating.

National Representation - it was asked what has been done to reinforce the situation to Central Government and what was being done by Medway MP's. The Director of People said that this was a historical workforce issue that was recognised nationally. The Association of Children's Services was lobbying Government on this matter on a regular basis. The issues had been a matter of priority for Medway MPs in particular as a result of the Improvement Journey but focus had drifted recently in light of other significant National issues.

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 29 September 2022

The Memorandum of Cooperation for Agency staff to manage the associated costs with agency worker supply and demand had been useful in sending the message to the market that all Local Authorities (LA) were to operate in the same way. There had, however, been a small number of breeches, but the majority of LA's adhered to the terms.

Recruitment Options – in response to a question on what other options were being looked into to recruit staff, the Officer said that the focus was on Medway investing in its own. The Council had a successful apprenticeship academy and would be expanding on its pathways.

It was further asked if the targeted recruitment campaign that was planned would only use the Guardian Recruitment, the Officer said that the Guardian had not been used by Medway for some time and the thinking behind its use at this time was the ability to target a wider catchment, particularly given that there was more flexibility on locations and days required to attend the office with our new ways of working.

Best Value – in response to a question on what was being done to achieve best value and saving money by not always using consultants. The Director of People said that very little work was done by consultants due to the high cost. Consultants were only used where needed as part of a particular project as part of the improvement journey. Funds were mainly used for recruitment and retention of permanent staff.

Staff Morale – it was asked what creative measures were used to improve staff morale. The Officer said that the staff reference group and Medway Makers were useful tools in teasing out what was important to staff and how to address issues. Engagement and communication with staff remained a priority for the senior leadership team. The officer shared that there was currently the annual staff survey out which would capture a number of themes and test how staff were feeling. This will be crucial to guide us through to next year.

Staff Sickness - the number of days lost in children's services due to sickness in comparison to the rest of the Council was high and it was asked what the presenting factors were. The Officer said that they were currently undertaking a deep dive into short and long term sickness. The latest rise in sickness was due to stress and depression which could be attributed to being in a pressurised workforce. Staff were being encouraged to prioritise their wellbeing and work was being done with public health on ways to address issues with wellbeing. Support for staff as part of the return to work process was in place as well as departmental mental health champions and access to Care First 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

The Director of People added that staff had incurred significant stress in trying to fill gaps due to staff shortage and must be commended for stepping up and going the extra mile in difficult times where a high number of referrals continued to be received by the department.

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 29 September 2022

Decision:

The Committee noted the report.

254 Council Plan Performance Monitoring & Risk Register Review Quarter 1 2022/23

Discussion:

The Director of People – Children and Adult Services introduced the report and with the support of other members of the Directorate Management Team, gave updates relating to the indicators flagged as red within the report.

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

Breast feeding – in response to comments that the inability to breastfeed was a sensitive issue and appropriate support was needed to enable mothers to continue with breastfeeding post birth, officers confirmed that the breastfeeding programme was appropriately sensitive. There was additional support in the community available once mothers had left the hospital setting, the challenge was communicating the availability of additional support and this was an area of ongoing work.

Medway Can Campaign – the launch of the Medway Can campaign was praised, and it was asked if a full detailed valuation of the programme would be received. Officers confirmed that the evaluation of the campaign to encourage people of Medway to live healthier active lifestyles would be shared at a future meeting

Not In Employment Education or Training (NEET) – in response to a question on whether the data that had been received by the Committee in the past was incorrect, officers confirmed that the not known data presented was correct and a full report would be represented at the 29 November 2022 meeting where detailed discussions could take place.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report.

255 Petition

Discussion:

Members considered a report which advised the Committee of a petition received by the Council which fell within the remit of the Committee, including a summary of the response sent to the petition organisers by officers.

The lead petitioner was invited to speak to explain why the petition had been referred to the Committee and made the following points:

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 29 September 2022

- An electronic vote was run, and an additional 909 votes were gathered in support of the petition
- The number of children eligible for Free School Meals had risen from 6000 to 11000 since the start of the COVID-19 Pandemic.
- Low-income households continue to be impacted by the rise of national inflation at 10%, rising energy costs, 11 million people behind on their bills and 15 million people using credit as a means to pay for essentials.
- Many families were at a loss as to how they would manage over the school summer holidays without the Free School Meals (FSM) voucher scheme.
- There had been an absence of information on the decision that the FSM Vouchers would cease and would no longer be issued. When officers were questioned at the June Committee meeting, they said that the voucher scheme would continue.
- The system where families received FSM vouchers automatically had been replaced with an application for Household Support Fund (HSF), access to which was a confusing and bureaucratic process.
- 11,000 children in Medway were eligible for FSM and only 774 benefitted from the HSF over the summer period.
- £350k of unused funds had been returned to Central Government.
- The HSF, how to apply and eligibility criteria had not been adequately publicised by the Council.
- A significant number of Local Authorities continued to fund the vouchers over the school holiday period for eligible families.
- A political decision had been made by the Council not to fund FSM holiday voucher and this must be looked at from the perspective of families of Medway who relied on the vouchers

In discussing the petition, the following responses were made to comments from Members:

Rising costs - the challenges in rising costs was recognised and whilst the voucher scheme was beneficial for families during the school holiday period, there was a need for a more sustainable way forward to support families that was not just focused on school holiday periods.

Communication - on 5 May 2022, the announcement was made by Central Government that the FSM holiday voucher scheme would be ending and this

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 29 September 2022

was subsequently communicated to schools that it would not be continued by the Council but it was acknowledged that this may not have been done with adequate notice for families to prepare and lessons had been learnt which officers undertook to address in future decisions.

Misinformation – in response to a request for an apology due to the misinformation provided, it was explained that officers had provided information based on their understanding of what had occurred at the time, the information given was real time information which did change as things progressed.

Medway's decision not to continue with the FSM scheme – whilst it was acknowledged that some local authorities had decided to continue with the provision of universal FSM vouchers, 50% of Councils in England had also decided not to continue to fund the scheme. The focus for Medway was to look at long term measures to support families to access ongoing support for the issues they were facing as a result of the cost of living crisis. As a result, the Medway Go Programme was beneficial in not only providing support to FSM eligible children with access to a nutritious meal, but other social opportunities. The scheme had enabled other services to be commissioned for families.

The HSF was not a means to replace the FSM voucher scheme and that was why there was an application process in place to ensure that people that needed the funding were able to access it.

Members were reminded that Medway GO and HSF were two separate programmes, to which families could apply for both without any restrictions.

Return of funds to Central Government – it was acknowledged that £350k was returned to Government due to the lack of receipt of applications from local people. There was a balance to be struck to ensure that the funds were disseminated to the right people. The funding element and guidance on grants constantly changed. There was more to be done to communicate with residents and simplify the process going forward.

Lessons learnt – it was agreed by all officers that there were always lessons to be learnt and processes would continue to be reviewed internally as well as by looking at the actions taken by other LAs across the country to see what could be done better for the people of Medway.

Following debate, a Member put forward a motion that had been shared with the Committee via email and circulated in writing at the meeting. The motion, which was seconded, read as follows:

“The Committee notes the decision taken by the leader under urgency provisions on 26th April and concludes that the decision not to fund vouchers for children eligible for free school meals over the summer holiday period should have not been taken and that funding for free school meals should have been made available. The reasons for this are as follows:

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 29 September 2022

- Funding for free school meals would have been easily administered support for a readily identifiable cohort of families who fall into a recognised category of hardship;
- Funding support for free school meals during school holidays started during the pandemic. The loss of the Universal Credit uplift and the continuing cost-of-living crisis has increased considerably the financial pressures on families since then. There is no logic to refusing support for families when financial hardship is greater for them now than during the pandemic;
- The number of Medway children eligible for free school meals has increased from 6,000 to 11,000 since the pandemic and from below average across local authorities to above average;
- The council response states that food is provided as part of the MedwayGo programme, but there are insufficient places to accommodate all children in Medway who are eligible for free school meals on MedwayGo;

The Committee notes also that the Council Response to the petition states that families could apply over the summer holiday period for financial support from the Household Support Fund to alleviate hardship. However:

- No public formal announcement was made that this provision was available;
- Councillors, officers, schools and parents were not made aware of the decision and its implications;
- No administrative systems or publicity were put in place before the summer holiday period.

The Committee further recommends to Cabinet that where future funding is provided by the Household Support Fund or other government support, that free school meals provision should be made available during the holiday periods”.

This motion was not supported upon being put to the vote.

In accordance with Council rule 12.6, Councillors Cooper, Howcroft-Scott, Johnson, Osbourne and Van-Dyke requested that their votes for this motion be recorded.

It was then moved and seconded that the Committee note the petition referral request in paragraph 3, and the Director of Public Health’s response, including the acknowledgement from officers that lessons had been learned.

On being put to the vote this motion was approved.

Decision:

The Committee noted the referral request in paragraph 3 of the report, and the Director of Public Health’s response, including the acknowledgement from officers that lessons had been learned.

256 Work Programme

Discussion:

The Democratic Services Officer introduced the report which provided the latest work programme information for the Committee.

Following discussion, it was agreed that an item on Post 16 review be added to the work programme for January/February 2023.

Decision:

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

Chairman

Date:

Stephanie Davis, Democratic Services Officer

Telephone: 01634 332104

Email: democratic.services@medway.gov.uk