

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

Thursday, 5 January 2023

6.30pm to 8.43pm

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), Ahmed, Barrett, Cooper, Sylvia Griffin, Howcroft-Scott, Johnson, Mahil, Osborne, Purdy, Thorne and Tranter

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

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

Added members without voting rights:

Rose Stokes, MYC Chairman (Medway Youth Council)

Substitutes: Councillor Adeoye (Substitute for Tejan)
Keith Clear (Substitute for Lisa Scarrott)
Councillor Williams (Substitute for Mrs Elizabeth Turpin)

In Attendance: Kelly Cogger, Head of First Response and Targeted Services
Stephanie Davis, Democratic Services Officer
Lee-Anne Farach, Director of People - Children and Adults'
Services
James Harman, Senior Public Health Manager
Sarah Skinner, Head of Adoption Service, Kent County Council
Rebecca Smith, Head of Service, Education
Roy Smith, Youth Service Operations Manager

479 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Carr, Tejan and Mrs Elizabeth Turpin

480 Record of meeting

The record of the meeting held on 29 November 2022 was agreed and signed as correct by the Chairman.

481 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were none.

482 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 OSI on item 7 (Curriculum Diversity) as she is a Governor at Rivermead School and a Trustee at Medway Afro Caribbean Association.

483 Medway Youth Council Annual Conference Report 2022

Discussion:

Rose Stokes, the Chair of the Medway Youth Council (MYC) for 2022-2023 presented the report which provided the Committee with details of the outcomes of the annual conference following their research into the impact of poverty on the young people of Medway. The report detailed key recommendations to schools and other organisations to support young people through the current cost of living crisis. The key findings of the research were highlighted as set out in appendices 1-4 of the report.

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

Support – it was asked what additional support the MYC needed to enable it to continue the valuable work that was provided to the young people of Medway. The Chair, MYC responded that the average cost of its work for the year amounted to £15000 and they had to fundraise or look for sponsorship to raise the funds to enable it to carry out its work. The MYC would be appreciative of any funds that could be provided by the Council towards this budget.

The MYC hoped to recruit more volunteers from a wider breadth of Medway and would ask that the Council and Councillors utilised any opportunity to promote the work of the MYC which may assist them in recruiting more volunteers to ensure more diverse representation on the youth council.

Practical Skills – it was commented that the current level of poverty experienced, in particular, by two parent working households were relatively new, and it was suggested that practical skills such as the importance of budgeting, money management, saving and mortgages should be taught in schools.

Financial Management – it was asked whether youth centres in Medway still provided young people with advice and guidance on money management, such as budgeting advice as this was offered in the past and well received. The Operations Manager, Medway Council Youth Service said that youth centres still provided this support to its young people.

Poverty and Social Determinants of Health – in response to a question on how the MYC would continue its research on poverty and social determinants of health, the Chair, MYC said that they were still at the initial stage of this work which would require more scoping. It was planned that a project, utilising the support and skills of the Youth Parliament would develop a survey that would be distributed to schools and third-party organisations to collate information in order to gain a better understanding on the link between poverty and social determinants of health of young people across Medway. It was suggested by a Member that the MYC engage the Public Health team in the scoping of this research.

The MYC Chair and Officers were thanked for all the work completed throughout the year and it was stressed how important and valuable receiving the annual reports at Committee was in hearing the voices of young people of Medway.

Decision:

The Committee noted the Medway Youth Council Annual Conference report 2022 and recommended the report be presented to full Council for its consideration.

484 Adoption Partnership South East, Regional Adoption Agency, Annual Report 2022

Discussion

The Head of Adoption Partnership South East introduced the report which provided information and overview of the service, performance set against government targets and service and practice development for the period November 2021 to October 2022.

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

Future development of the service – it was asked how likely the service was to be successful and secure funding following the bid submitted for Centre of Excellence. The Head of Adoption Partnership South East informed the Committee that it was envisaged that the bid would be successful, and this would be instrumental in the recruitment of therapists and enable a consistent

service to be provided. Currently there were clinicians in place that were solely Kent County Council employees, the success of the bid would allow the opportunity to expand the service through employment of a clinician to serve a wider area of the service.

Assessment of new partners - in response to a question on what the process would be if the relationship of adoptive parents dissolved and one or both of the parents started new relationships, the officer advised the Committee that once an adoption order had been granted, the adoptive parents became the legal guardian of the child. A new partner or stepparent did not acquire automatic parental responsibility of the child unless they embarked on a legal process to formalise responsibility.

Virtual Panels - in response to a question on the likelihood of future panel being held in person, the Head of Adoption Partnership South East said that a survey was conducted, the result of which has led to the continuation of virtual panels. was a higher preference for virtual panels due to increased accessibility. This would however continue to be reviewed on a regular basis.

Support for adopters - a question was asked on how long support was in place for adoptive parents. The Head of Adoption Partnership South East said that one of the aims of the service was to provide an open door to adoptive parents seeking support. When children were placed, an adoption support plan is agreed. Once an adoption was finalised, some families preferred to get on with family life without support whilst others had ongoing packages in place such as therapeutic support. Families were able to access a range of support services such as training programmes, social work support, therapeutic support and were also signposted to other relevant services for additional support.

Issues with permanency of adoption – it was asked what happened in instances where there was adoption breakdown. The Head of Adoption Partnership South East said that this was uncommon. During 2021/2022 there had been one instance of placement disruption and both child and parents were appropriately supported. If during the adoption process there were serious issues with progression, the child would return to care and the plan may continue to be one of adoption or an alternative care plan may be identified. The child would be supported by their social worker and a family finding social worker if the plan of adoption remains. When looking at difficulties that arise after an adoption order had been granted and potentially sometime after, it is important to remember that parents and children experience family issues in the way that other children, who are not adopted do, in particular during teenage years. Adoptive parents received support such as provision of training on identity and normalisation of adoption to assist them with navigation of some of the more challenging periods.

The Director of People, Adult and Children's Services added that it was important to note that adoption was highly regulated, with any potential issues looked into thoroughly prior to the adoption being finalised and legal responsibility being granted.

Budget - in response to a question on why additional funding has been requested when there was an underspend in the previous year's budget. The Director of People, Adults' and Children's Services said that this was a newly established Regional Adoption Agency (RAA), and the yearly budget was still being finalised. A liberal approach was taken with the budget this year which would be rightsized by the next financial year.

Placement Matching – it was asked why Medway's figures for placement matching was significantly higher than other Local Authorities. The Head of Adoption Partnership responded that the figures highlighted Medway's performance prior to entering the RAA. The figures were for 2019/20 prior to the RAA where there were placement orders in place but no matches, a lot of work had to be conducted and significant improvement had been made which was reflected in the 2021/22 figures. The high figures illustrated in the report where a child entered care and was placed for adoption reflected the situation during the Covid Pandemic where there were significant delays on the court process, this had also now improved.

Structure – it was commented that many Local Authorities were reviewing their model with the possibility of making changes and it was asked if Medway would be doing the same. The Head of Adoption Partnership South East said that there were currently no plans in place to alter the current model. This was one of the last RAAs to be formed with a preference for a partnership model

Early Permanence Planning – it was asked how the services conducted early permanence planning – The Head of Adoption Partnership South East said that since November 2020 there had been approximately 60 placements. There was a dedicated early permanence team in place which consists of permanent planning leads who work with children's social workers to identify children with potential adoption plans at an early stage. They work alongside the local authority social worker. Funding has been secured to support an early permanence workforce and Barnardo's had been commissioned to provide enhanced services to support birth parents.

Partnership – in response to a question on maintenance of effective partnership with families, the Head of Adoption Partnership South East said that there was an advisory board in place to monitor and maintain partnership. Monthly bulletins were sent to parents to notify of resources and regular parent meetings were held throughout the year. Barnardo's also provide opportunities for feedback from parents that would be fed back to the RAA.

Recruitment of potential adopters – it was asked how the agency reached out to perspective adopters. The Head of Adoption Partnership South East said that there was information on their website on how a consultation could be requested. Communication strategies such as national and local press releases and radio advertising were used to attract local people who wanted to embark on the process.

It was further asked why there was a lack of mention of placement of children with complex needs in the report. The Head of Adoption Partnership South East

said that the number of children with recognised disability coming through the adoption process was small. Whilst there may be children with complex needs in the system, this may not necessarily have been diagnosed at the point they came through the adoption process but as their needs were recognised, the appropriate support and specialism were sought.

Decision

The Committee noted the report and recommended that future reports include national comparative performance figures.

485 Curriculum Diversity

Discussion:

The Head of Service, Education introduced the report which detailed the two work strands that underpinned the work of the Curriculum Diversity group, Medway's Heroes in Time, and the Medway Cultural Education Partnership (MCEP), School's Cultural Programming subgroup.

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

It was encouraging that the importance of Black history being thought all year round and not just in October was recognised. It was also however commented that it was important not to lose the essence and celebration of Black history month due to it being taught all year round as it was vital that the celebration events of Black history month continue alongside Black history being taught in schools.

Black History Month Events - it was commented that there was a lack of representation of Black history month events across Medway in October 2022 and it was hoped that the partnership would look to improve on the quality of events going forward.

Budget – it was asked if the budget of £10,000 was enough to support the work of the partnership and how the budget could be further increased. The Head of Service, Education said that the initial budget was £10,000 and the plan was to work with other partnerships and groups in order to extend the work being done and work to identify any available funding stream. In the past, funding had been obtained from other sources but there was no guarantee of additional funding streams.

Diversity – concern was raised on how to ensure free schools diversified their curriculum as they were not bound by the requirements of the national curriculum. It was asked if the remit of the curriculum diversity work could be diversified further in future to include for instance gender. The Officer said that curriculum review was ongoing within schools, this meant that schools were responsible and would be held accountable by Ofsted on the delivery of their curriculum and whether it promoted diversity and inclusion for its pupils. The suggestion to broaden the remit of the work of the group beyond ethnicity going forward was welcomed.

Membership – it was commented that the group that worked on the project included some political members of the administration, and it would be beneficial for this work to include other councillors. The Head of Service, Education acknowledged the point to widen membership of the group.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report.

486 Tackling Racism in Schools

Discussion:

The Head of Service, Education introduced the report which provided information and updates from various services and teams within Education and SEND on how they were tackling issues of racism, promoting diversity and/or addressing equality.

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

Tackling instances of racism - it was asked how schools were dealing with this issue and the lack of expertise in training on issues such as unconscious bias which was a concern. The Head of Service, Education said the report briefly touched on exclusion data for permanent exclusion due to racial instances on the request from the prevent group on how to identify racial incidences in schools. There was no requirement for schools to inform the Local Authority of incidences of racial instances within their schools as it was not a statutory obligation, but schools were asked for feedback on how Medway Council could support them in reporting incidences and the department was exploring how to widen schools' knowledge on this issue as well as unconscious bias.

Incidences of racial abuse- it was asked how many schools were sending back information regarding issues of racial incidences and it was important to raise awareness that abuse can and does extend beyond the school environment. Due to the increase of use of social media, abuse had now extended online. The Head of Service, Education said that since 2017, there had been three permanent exclusions as a result of racial incidences. Medway Council officers worked closely with prevent officers who were able to respond to any issues and incidences, including cyber bullying. The Public Health team worked in partnership to raise awareness and the Communications team included in their regular headteachers bulletin on how and where to access support.

False accusations - it was asked how false accusations of racial abuse were being managed. The Head of Service, Education highlighted the importance of robust investigations in all incidences reported. It was vital that schools deployed the same level of robustness as in its safeguarding investigation processes as it did in handling reported issues of racial abuse complaints.

English as second language and Special Education Needs - a Member said that it had been brought to attention by families where some schools were making an unfounded link between children with English as their second language and special educational needs which meant parents were reluctant to complete forms to state that English was not their first language. The Head of Service, Education expressed disappointment that this link was being made by some schools and stressed that having English as a second language did not equate to having a special educational need, this had also been made clear by the Regional Schools' service.

It was commented that provision of education and training for all was instrumental in understanding issues that were experienced by all ethnic groups and by promoting inclusion and diversity, schools and educational establishments could begin to tackle issues of racism.

Members agreed on the significance of all young people to be encouraged to report any instances of racial incidence experienced without fear of reprisal and being assured that the incident would be thoroughly investigated.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report.

487 Work programme

Discussion:

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

The Committee was informed that there was an upcoming Ofsted inspection of Children's Social Care, the date of which was unknown at this time. It was envisaged that an update report would be presented on the latest monitoring visit at the 2 March 2023 Committee meeting should the inspection occur prior to agenda publication for the meeting.

Decision:

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

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 5 January 2023

Chairman

Date:

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