

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

Thursday, 3 August 2023

6.30pm to 9.33pm

Record of the meeting

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

Present: Councillors: Mandaracas (Vice-Chairperson), Animashaun, Campbell, Gulvin, Jackson, Jones, Lammas, Perfect, Shokar and Mrs Turpin

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

Lenny Williams (C of E Diocese Representative, Rochester Diocesan Board of Education)

Added members without voting rights:

Victoria Aspin (Teacher Representative), MYC Cabinet Member (Medway Youth Council) and Lisa Scarrott (Medway Parent and Carers Forum)

Substitutes:

Councillors:
Anang (Substitute for Spring)
Gurung (Substitute for Howcroft-Scott)
Peake (Substitute for Hamilton)

In Attendance:

Aretha Banton, Strategic Head of Education Quality and Inclusion
Maria Beaney, Finance Business Partner, Education
Celia Buxton, Assistant Director, Education and SEND
Stephanie Davis, Democratic Services Officer
Lee-Anne Farach, Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive
Samuel Robinson, ART Team Leader

159 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Hamilton, Councillor Howcroft-Scott, Councillor Pearce, Councillor Spring, Carl Guerin-Hassett (Headteacher Representative), Clive Mailing (Catholic Diocese Representative), Rose Stokes (MYC Cabinet Member) and Emma-Sue Willows (Healthwatch Medway).

160 Record of meeting

The minutes of the meeting of 14 June 2023 was agreed and signed by the Chairperson as correct.

161 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were none.

The Chairperson extended thanks on behalf of the Committee to Clive Mailing, the Catholic Diocese representative who had resigned from the Committee due to retirement, for all his hard work and dedication since his appointment in 2013. The Committee wished him all the best for the future and a happy retirement.

162 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.

163 Meeting Theme: Education and Special Educational Needs and Disability

Discussion:

The Assistant Director of Education and SEND introduced the item and gave a detailed presentation on the tabled reports.

Best Practice – it was asked what the Council was doing to ensure that best practice from good SENDCOs was replicated in all schools to ensure that all children in Medway had access to best services. The officers said that there were various practices taking place to ensure that skills and learning were shared across schools in Medway. The Council was heavily invested in the training, development and upskilling of all staff across schools by creating a mechanism to disseminate training support and giving schools the ability to determine what training best fits their needs. This was done by working with schools and creating an annual training programme that they could select from targeted areas as needed. It was vital to create an appropriate schedule and get the training offer right. There was also an outreach programme in place which worked to get people into schools to provide support and guidance. An

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annual conference had taken place where learning and best practice was shared and there was continuous work on how to strengthen services. It was important that SENDCOs were part of the senior leadership team to ensure that they were able to advocate within schools and push the inclusion agenda.

It was further asked how equipped mainstream schools were in their ability to teach children with SEND and their attitude to supporting these children. The officer said that there was a broad range of schools in Medway. The support in schools varied with some schools extremely inclusive whilst some still had some work to do as they were less experienced, to improve standards. On the whole, schools were supportive of the SEND Strategy and wanted to work in partnership with the Council and providers to ensure that early intervention and support was provided to pupils.

Engagement - in response to questions on what level of engagement had taken place with CEOs of academies as well as maintained schools on the ambitions of the SEND Strategy Action Plan, officers said that there were CEOs on the action plan group, and they were part of the governance process. Officers from the Council regularly attended the CEOs monthly group meetings and engaged in follow up conversations as necessary. There was an operation group in place that met monthly and fed into the governance processes of the SEND partnership group. Some of the CEOs were onboard with the changes and ambition whilst some were apprehensive of change as they were in transition.

Top up Funding – more information was sought on the Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) banding as there were concern regarding accuracy of assessment and that schools were in receipt of the appropriate level of funding. In particular, for Special Education Needs Code K (SEN K) children. The officer clarified that SEN K were children that did not have an EHCP but were identified to have a need following assessment by the school. Historically a school could make a case for and apply for additional funding for SEN K children for six months for intensive support for a child. If a child required longer term support that would cost more the £6,000, then an application for EHCP was recommended. Following revisions to the SEN notional budget policy, in consultation with schools, an increase of £490,000 had been given out to schools to top up their SEN notional budget, based on the January census. This put more money into schools that had been recognised as experiencing the biggest challenge. The use of Family Hubs would support parents to navigate the system, provide advice on individual need which would help to manage the demand for EHCP and other support.

Delays in EHCP – there was extensive work underway to clear the backlog of applications. This backlog was attributed to the national recruitment challenges and staff shortages experienced across the country and the Council was working to resolve this through the use of agency caseworkers and employment of trainees. The aspiration was to get to a point that all backlogs were cleared, and the team were working towards a target date of April 2024. The aspiration was to be at a point where all EHCP's would be completed in a timely manner and schools fulfilling their obligations.

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It was commented that there was a notable reduction in EHCP applications from parents, and it was asked what the driver was for this. The officer said extensive work was being done with parents and carers by responding to their needs, providing support, and being more accessible to families resulted in the reduction of applications. Historically, the high numbers of EHCP applications were from parents that were frustrated at not receiving the support needed which made them resort to making applications which in turn would not be supported.

Selective Education – it was asked if the Council had made representation for different funding to reflect the number of selective schools in Medway. The officer said that the proportion of children in selective schools with EHCP was low. Children with SEN had to pass the Medway Tests for them to attend selective schools which meant there were more children with EHCP's in mainstream schools, however no representation for increased funding had been made as a result of this. The Council was trying to address the accessibility of the education system in place by working with headteachers of selective schools on the provision for SEN children. The Medway Test was also being reviewed to make it more accessible for children with SEN.

Family Experience – concerns were raised on the experience of parents and carers when navigating the system as issues had been raised over time regarding barriers they faced. Reassurance was sought that this Strategy would make an impact, be tangible and that there would not be a repeat of the same historical issues faced with complexity of processes and limited joined up working of services. Officers said that they now received broader feedback from parents and carers due to the large database in place, and they worked closely with the Medway Parents and Carers Forum (MPCF) to gather intelligence. There was a strengthened permanent team in place who utilised the information gathered in tailoring services for families.

In response to a further question on the quality of the surveys and information gathered, officers said that the information was looked at as a whole and not just qualitative, with hard evidence in terms of outcomes being derived. Trends were being explored to draw out wider themes for exploration and making sure that strong evidence based resources were in place. The qualitative information would be translated into quantitative, would be fed back into the action plan and the action plans to feed into and complement each other. The IT team also worked to ensure that the pathways for parents and carers to submit information was accessible. A review and evaluation process had been built into the process to assess the impact on families of the work that had been completed.

Safety Valve Funding - £17.5 million had been set which would address the deficit, it was asked what the timeline was for this to be fully released and whether the Council's ambitions aligned with funding requirements which were dependent on success. Members were advised that there was a robust risk register in place to support the Safety Valve Action Plan and that funds would only be released upon meeting targets that are set in the action plan. It was confirmed that the first tranche of the funding which was £5.7 million had been

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received and confirmation that the first tranche of this year's funding which was just over £700,000 would be released.

The officer clarified that at the point that the Safety Valve application was made, the High Needs Block had a £23,000,000 deficit. The Council received approximately £54,000,000 a year for High Needs Block funding and the Plan would provide the ability to operate within the £54,000,000 in year balance. The Safety Valve Funding received would be used to reduce the deficit and by 2026 there would no longer be a deficit. There were currently more children needing specialist schools than available capacity which meant the children then went to independent specialist placements and this was where costs escalated. The quality of those provision was less, comparable to Medway specialist schools which were all good and outstanding. There was currently enough capacity in the special schools system for growth as part of the capital programme to cater for children in Medway that needed specialist provision. The key was to ensure that more children with fewer complex needs be catered for in mainstream provision so that special schools could focus on children with complex needs, and this would reduce the range of independent specialist provision.

It was requested and agreed that a briefing note inclusive of RAG ratings be provided to the Committee on Safety Valve Funding. The timeline of this was to be further discussed with the Assistant Director of Education and it may be more appropriate for this to be provided when the next report to the Department for Education was submitted.

Governance - in response to a question on what governance structure was in place around the Safety Valve programme to ensure that sufficient progress was being made, officers said that they had to report tri-annually to the DfE on progress made, including identification of risks. The reports submitted determined whether the next tranche of funding would be released. The Council also had its own governance in place which included the Schools Forum, the Education Oversight Group, the Portfolio Holder as well as the Chief Finance Officer.

Early Years – it was asked why the training programme had not been rolled out to Early Years first, the officer said that the Early Years programme had always been in place, was strengthened this year and continued to grow. There was an Early Years and SEND team in place that also acted as portage support for early years

Mental Health - the use of Family Hubs to support families and assist them in navigation of the SEN system was commended. It was however stressed that more needed to be done to support families and children waiting for EHCP assessments that were in primary schools as families were deemed to be coping but this was not the case. There was an increasing number of children that were being diagnosed and referred to Child Adolescence Mental Health Service (CAMHS) for mental health support as a secondary condition. The officer said that on reflection and self-evaluation it was evident that more needed to be done to address the issues and impact of the experience of children with SEN, their parents and carers.

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Outreach Support – it was asked why some providers of schools outreach support had been advised that they could no longer support schools in the capacity they had previously done as they would be receiving less funding in the coming year. The officer said that the outcome of commissioning for outreach support would be published in September 2023. Some providers had been successful whilst others did not win their bids. A second round of commissioning was due to take place and the commissioning process in place was extremely robust.

Post 16 Inclusion - it was asked what was being done to ensure that vulnerable young people, in particular those Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) received support and were signposted to the right provision. The officer said that there was a good range of provision in place at level three which was A level and onwards. There was, however, a lack of offer below level three which affected more vulnerable young people and this area required more work needed to be done. The Youth Service was working in partnership with other services in order to establish different pathways for young people and NEET figures had improved in the last year due to the Youth Team and Information, Advice and Guidance teams working together in partnership to support young people. There was a need to consolidate the offer and ensure the right breadth of provision for young people which required partnership working to which the Council were facilitators, but it was down to the providers and the Post 16 Partnership and the Medway Education Partnership group to work together to respond to the recommendations made in the report.

In response to a further question on what was being done to support children with SEND that wanted to access apprenticeships, officers said that there was an apprenticeship teams that linked with employers. There were however not as many apprenticeship opportunities available but there was an offer of support in place for young people with SEND.

The Committee was informed that there were work programmes in place that allowed students to receive a mixed economy of learning which included practical skills, and there was ongoing work with providers to discuss what offer was in place for young people. Mainstream schools worked extensively with their young people to guide them on their chosen pathways. Post 16 must be looked at in its entirety as whilst many young people did choose the higher education route, there were those that wanted to follow a different pathway.

Agency Staff - in response to questions on what training was in place to ensure EHCP agency staff understood and aligned with the core ambitions of Medway, officers clarified that there was not a high turnover of staff and the staff in place were long term agency staff due to the need to ensure capacity was maintained over time, particularly due to moving to the Hub structure. There was a rigorous interview process in place to ensure that the highest calibre of staff was recruited. An extensive induction programme was in place and all staff received an induction with an assigned caseworker, shadowing took place with the provision of ongoing training and support in place. It was vital to get the induction programme right so as not to hinder progress and to add value.

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The Committee commended the Education Department for all their work, the thorough way the questions had been answered and the MCPF representative expressed that there had been more input, support and interaction in the last 12-18 months which had made a significant impact on parents.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report on Medway Joint Local Area SEND Action Plan, SEND Inspection Performance Update and Post 16 Review.

a Medway Joint Local Area SEND Action Plan

Discussion:

Discussion of this Item can be found at minute number 163.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report.

b SEND Inspection Performance Update

Discussion:

Discussion of this Item can be found at minute number 163.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report.

c Post-16 Review

Discussion:

Discussion of this Item can be found at minute number 163.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report.

164 Annual Fostering Report (2022 - 2023)

Discussion:

The Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive introduced the annual report which set out how Medway met the needs of children in care in the year 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023 and detailed the work to be undertaken in the coming year.

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

Social Media - it was asked how effective the use of social media had been in recruitment of foster carers in comparison to other methods, the costs involved and with the increase in digital presence, what more was being done to maintain Medway's Fostering reputation. Members were informed that recruitment of foster carers was a highly competitive market. The team worked diligently to maintain the brand and reputation that had been established by ensuring it met its statutory responsibilities of provision of safe and caring environments for children of Medway whilst continually focusing on improvement. The team, despite being a small team with limited resources to compete, actively strived to maintain advantage within a competitive market by listening to the information provided by foster carers and young people, and prioritised recruitment for more in house Medway foster carers in the community. The use of social media had proved to be a valuable and effective means of promoting the service in addition to the other methods used to target a wide range of people. The cost of Pay-Per-Click (PPC) for a 12 month period was just under £20,000.

Recruitment - in response to a question on the reasons behind the loss of permanent staff and what information was gathered from exit interviews, the officer said workforce was a national issue affecting children's social care. There were various reasons that affected turnover of staff, such as people wanting to work closer to home or personal family circumstances as well as other issues. It was important to note that posts were being continuously recruited to and recruitment and retention of staff remained a priority in all areas of children's social care. Exit interviews took place on a regular basis and the information gathered was a useful learning tool.

Recruitment of foster carers – it was asked what intelligence was gathered from the applicants that withdrew their applications, or those that later went on to work for Independent Fostering Agencies. The officer said that people withdrew for various personal reasons. If a potential carer withdrew their application, then they had made the right decision at the time, because it was vital that potential carers were confident and fully committed before deciding to foster children. There were instances where months later, applicants may then decide to sign up with an Independent Fostering Agency, this was also due to different reasons, and it was not incumbent for them to provide information as to the reasons for their decision.

It was further asked what incentives and discounts were provided for foster carers to access local services and activities. Officers said that recruitment and retention of foster carers was a priority and discussions were taking place with colleague in public health on how to utilise their services in recruitment drives. The offer for foster carers had been increased in the last year, included in that were discounts for access to adult education, with some access to discounted offers for activities and leisure. The department also worked with the Independent Fostering Agency forum in Medway and surrounding areas to compare marketing strategies and ensure that similar marketing strategies were maintained.

Data - it was commented that it would be beneficial for a broader range of data to be provided in future reports which provided details on in house and well as

independent fostering agencies. The officer said that the report was written as required, to evidence the fostering departments statutory responsibilities and that Members request for supplementary data was noted.

Deregistration of foster carers - it was noted that there had been a small number of terminations of approval due to standards of care. The officer said that fostering was a highly regulated and rigorous arena. Any termination would have been due to a breach in the high standards of care that were expected and a decision for this would not have been made unless there had been a need to act. A Member added that there was a process that had to be followed in instances where there were issues with standards of care, whereby the local authority would try to work with foster carers and navigate through the complexities of the presenting issues prior to a final decision of termination.

Permanency - the team was commended for the hard work and success in achieving permanency in special guardians, long term, as well as connected foster carers. Assurance was sought on the occurrence of permanency planning reviews due to the changing needs of foster carers and children. The officer provided reassurance that permanency planning reviews took place on a weekly basis with a tracker kept that was overseen by managers.

Decision:

The Committee noted the Annual Fostering Report (2022-2023).

165 Work Programme

Discussion:

The Democratic Services Officer introduced the report and informed Members that the next Performance Data Workshop would take place in September with the date to be confirmed after the meeting. A workshop on the Dedicated Schools Grant National Funding Formula would take place in November, the date of which would be confirmed once finalised.

Members were advised to discuss and agree suggestions within their groups for Task Group topics and for the suggestions to be fed back by the Chairperson and Opposition Spokesperson for further discussion at the meeting proposed for Chairpersons, Vice-Chairpersons and Opposition Spokespersons.

Decision:

The Committee agreed to:

- a) Note the work programme as set out in appendix 1 to the work programme report.
- b) Identify up to two potential Task Group topics for consideration at a meeting of Overview and Scrutiny Committee Chairpersons, Vice Chairpersons and Opposition Spokespersons.

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Chairperson

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