

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

Thursday, 5 October 2023

6.30pm to 9.37pm

Record of the meeting

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

Present: Councillors: Howcroft-Scott (Chairperson), Mandaracas (Vice-Chairperson), Animashaun, Campbell, Gulvin, Hamilton, Jackson, Jones, Lammas, Perfect, Spring 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:

MYC Cabinet Member (Medway Youth Council) and Lisa Scarrott (Medway Parent and Carers Forum)

Substitutes: Councillors:
Crozer (Substitute for Pearce)

In Attendance: Celia Buxton, Assistant Director, Education and SEND
Kelly Cogger, Head of First Response and Targeted Services
Rebecca Cooper, Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance
Ingrid Crisan, Head of Service, Provider Services
Stephanie Davis, Democratic Services Officer
Lee-Anne Farach, Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive
Andy McNally-Johnson, Head of Corporate Accounts
David Reynolds, Head of Revenue Accounts
John Taylor, Commissioning Lead - Placements
Sophie Wilson, Medway Children Young People Council

281 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Pearce, Councillor Shokar, and Victoria Aspin, Teacher Representative.

282 Record of meeting

The record of the meeting held on 3 August 2023 was agreed and signed by the Chairperson as correct.

283 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were none.

284 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.

285 Meeting Theme: Children's Social Care

Discussion:

The Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive supported by officers in the directorate introduced the item and gave a detailed presentation on the tabled report.

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

Members congratulated the department on the outcome of the Ofsted inspection and recognised the hard work, effort and dedication by the teams to deliver on the improvement journey to achieve the 'Good' rating. The efforts of the previous Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, the previous Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson and Opposition Spokesperson for the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee were commended as they all worked tirelessly to build on improvement to leadership and partnership.

Recruitment and Workforce – in response to a question on how resilience was being built into the workforce and how to sustain the 'good' status, officers said that this rating made working for Medway attractive and the status it afforded the Council should not be underestimated. This was a great opportunity to sell Medway as the place to work for and build a permanent workforce.

It was further asked what apprenticeships were available and officers said that degree apprenticeships were offered and many social workers currently in place had come through that route. The aspiration remained to 'grow our own' and many members of the workforce including at senior level had worked their way up through the service.

Agency Staff – the variance in pay for locum staff and permanent staff was queried and officers said that Medway was part of a memorandum where the cost was the same for all agencies, who were held to account on pay for staff across the South East. The offer for permanent staff outweighed the pay for agency staff due to the good staff package in place which included an extensive training and workforce development offer. Lobbying, was however taking place for laws to be brought in to address differences in pay in order to minimise competition and to offer the same terms and conditions for temporary and permanent staff.

Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) – it was asked what the provision received from Central Government for UASC in Medway was and the impact on existing services. The officer said that there were currently approximately 26 children that had been placed out of a possible 63 under the national transfer scheme. There was funding attached to every child but whether it was enough was not yet evident as this was a new scheme for Medway. Taking on additional children always puts pressure on services, but all partners were committed to working together to provide the best possible outcomes for all children in Medway's care. The main strain on the budget was when a child became a care leaver as Medway would be solely responsible at that stage for their funding

Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children Funding - in response to a question on how much Medway had to put forward to support these children, the officer said that this was an ever changing picture. There were pressures on the Councils budget with, significant shortfall in funding that was being experienced by all local authorities. The Commissioning Team worked tirelessly to explore different ways to alleviate pressures on the budget whilst ensuring quality of service was not compromised

Adolescence - it was commented that more needed to be done to address the issues with the long term support provided to adolescents in Medway in particular in areas of mental health support. The importance of targeted support in early years to adopt a preventative method to issues that present later in life was highlighted. Officers acknowledged the issues and agreed that intervention was not at the stage that it needed to be. There were several strands of work that were being explored as it was recognised that working with adolescents was challenging and services needed to be tailored to meet their specific needs. This area of improvement remained a priority and one of the aspirations was to have in place, a consistent workforce which was one of the major factors in driving improvement.

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Members commented that it was vital that line of sight on improvements to these areas of service be maintained by the Committee and it was suggested and agreed that a report be brought to Committee on the offer for adolescents.

Fostering – in response to questions and comments on what was being done to improve the support that was offered to carers, in particular those caring for children with complex needs, officers said that there remained extensive support for carers, and this was being continuously built on. The feedback from many carers was that they felt generally supported and the service actively explored different ways to build on emotional resilience and support for carers. Foster carers had been recruited specifically to provide respite care for those that were caring for children with disabilities as the need with that cohort was recognised.

In ensuring that children in private fostering arrangements were appropriately taken care of, line of sight was maintained by various agencies. Social workers visited regularly to conduct assessments, and the Commissioning Team also exercised good diligence in their oversight of agencies used.

It was further asked if foster carers that were no longer fostering were being utilised in other areas and officers said that they continued to collaborate with foster carers that had retired or left the service. They were offered other strands of work during their exit interviews such as mentoring and training new carers and being part of recruitment drives.

In response to a question on what was being done to keep sibling groups together, officers said it was challenging to find carers to support siblings, in particular larger groups as the regulations allowed for four children to be cared for together. Any decision to separate children was not taken lightly and all that could be done was, to keep siblings together where possible.

It was commented that it was essential that focus is kept on the areas of children's services that still required improvement and be transparent on what actions are taken to improve services. It was suggested and agreed that the action plans for this area of service be shared with the Committee to ensure that progress was being monitored and maintained over time.

Variance in service - officers reassured Members that they were consistently working to tackle instances of variable practice that had been identified across some areas of the service. This was being addressed through maintenance of consistency through permanency in workforce and ensuring that the right people were in post. There was continuous learning from the audits that took place which highlighted quality of practice, areas of improvement, developmental opportunities and acted as a basis for production of action plans to address inconsistencies in practice.

Decision:

The Committee agreed:

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- a) to note the report
- b) that a report on workforce be presented to the Committee.
- c) that a report on the offer for adolescents be presented at a future meeting of the Committee.
- d) to recommend that the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services write to Central Government to Lobby for more funding to support Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children.

a Children's Services Update Including Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services Findings (ILACS), Workforce and Sufficiency

Discussion:

Discussion of this Item can be found at minute number 285.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report.

286 Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report 2022-2023

Discussion:

Members received the report on how the needs of children in care were met by the Independent Reviewing Service and the work to be undertaken in the coming year.

Members then raised questions and comments which included:

It was suggested and agreed that Members receive a suitably redacted copy of a letter written to children and young people by the independent reviewing officers as part of their child in care review work, in order to gain a better understanding of what was contained in the letters.

Caseloads - in response to a question on better understanding of why caseloads were higher in the service in comparison to others in children's services, the officer confirmed that the recommended caseload was between 50 and 70. Medway caseloads fluctuated between 60-70 and was within the national statutory framework.

Decision:

The Committee agreed to note the report.

287 Capital Budget Monitoring Round 1 2023/24

Discussion:

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The Head of Corporate Accounts introduced the report on the results of the first round of the Council's capital budget monitoring process for 2023/24.

It was clarified that there had been an underspend projected on round 1 based on returns completed in June 2023 of £115,000.00.

School Builds – it was asked what long term provision was in place for placement of children in schools by the fair access panel which had increased year on year. The officer said that each year the service produced a School Places Strategy to look forward on what was needed, this was reviewed on an annual basis. Any new housing developments in Medway came with S106 funding that also contributed towards provision of infrastructure for children that came into Medway.

Special Educational Needs and Disability Funding (SEND) – in response to a question on whether the forecasted underspend could be transferred to the SEND funding, the officer said that there was a process by which the stream for each section was set and approved by Council. This was based on the funding of that scheme which many have conditions attached and may prevent the funds from being switched to another area of service. If any funding was not used, it was returned to the funding pot for consideration for future additions to the capital programme.

Decision:

The Committee agreed to:

- a) note the results of the first round of capital budget monitoring for 2023/24.
- b) note the changes made to the capital programme as set out in 8.1 and 8.2 to the report.

288 Revenue Budget Monitoring Round 1 2023/24

Discussion:

Members considered the report on the results of the first round of the Council's revenue budget monitoring process for 2023/24.

SEND - in response to concern regarding the changes to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Budget, the reduction in spend and the impact this may have on children in Medway. The officer reassured Members that the underspend did not mean that children were receiving less services and the reason for reduced spending was as a result of improvement to procurement and commissioning.

In response to a further question of what would happen if the department did not meet the requirements of the Safety Valve Intervention Plan, the officer said

that the additional funding which was required to offset the overall deficit would not be received. Any identified issues were reported to the DfE immediately.

Decision:

The Committee agreed to

- a) note the results of the first round of revenue budget monitoring for 2023/24.
- b) note that Cabinet approved the virement of £500,000 from the Independent Fostering Agency budget to the internal fostering budget to reflect the increased internal fostering rates.
- c) note that Cabinet instructed the Corporate Management Team to implement urgent actions to bring expenditure back within the budget agreed by Full Council.

289 Council Plan Performance Monitoring Report & Strategic Risk Summary Quarter 1 2023/24

Discussion:

Members considered the report which detailed the Councils Quarter 1 Performance monitoring and Strategic Risk Summary.

Key Stage 2 – it was asked what action was taken to address the issues of pupils not meeting the required standards. The officer acknowledged that this was an area of priority, informed Members that the reasons were broad but provided reassurance that they were working with maintained schools as part of the improvement programme to support them in raising standards. The department also extended its support to Academies by working with them and sharing information, but they were accountable to Regional Schools Director and not the Local Authority. There was a literacy strategy being drawn up to address some issues presented.

Persistent absence – Members raised concern regarding the high prevalence of persistent absence in Medway schools and questioned what was being done to address the issues and improve attendance. The officer explained that an outreach service had been commissioned to go into homes and work with young people and their families who were not attending school due to anxiety to support them back into school. Support continued to be provided to schools to help them better understand the reasons for absence and what could be put in place to support families and improve outcomes.

A message of thanks was extended to the Councils Youth Team for taking the lead and working with senior staff at Greenacre School and Walderslade Girls School following a period of issues experienced at the schools.

Performance – it was asked what was being done to improve the numbers that are red on the register. The officer said that there were various actions being taken. The children social care targets that were red were mainly due to workforce issues. The workforce and sufficiency strategies that had been developed and were working alongside each other would play their role to shift those targets.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report.

290 Work programme

Discussion:

The Committee considered the work programme and agreed that whilst they had requested a report to be brought to the next meeting on the offer for adolescents, due to the large agenda of the December meeting, it would be more appropriate for this to be brought to the 11 January 2024 meeting.

It was requested that a report on SEND transport be brought to the Committee prior to a decision being made and officers agreed that a briefing paper on the process and lessons learnt will be shared with the Committee.

The importance of attendance at the data workshop meeting that was offered was stressed due to the value and ability they provide Members to gain in depth understanding of the topics for discussion as Committee meetings.

Decision:

The Committee:

- a) noted the report and agreed the work programme as set out at Appendix A to the report, subject to accepting the proposed changes, outlined in italic text on Appendix A.
- b) agreed that a report on the offer for adolescents be presented at the 11 January 2024 meeting.

Chairperson

Date:

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