

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

Thursday, 7 March 2024

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: Howcroft-Scott (Chairperson), Mandaracas (Vice-Chairperson), Animashaun, Campbell, Hamilton, Jackson, Jones, Lammass and Perfect

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

Sharon Docherty (Roman Catholic Diocese Representative, Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Southwark) and Georgina Bentaleb (Parent Governor Representative)

Added members without voting rights:

Alice Pledger (Teacher Representative), Oliver Tomlin MYC Cabinet Member (Medway Youth Council) and Lisa Scarrott (Medway Parent and Carers Forum)

Substitutes:

Councillors:
Anang (Substitute for Spring)
Nestorov (Substitute for Gurung)

In Attendance:

Maria Beaney, Finance Business Partner, Education
Celia Buxton, Assistant Director, Education and SEND
Hannah Christie, Programme Lead Childrens Mental Health and Emotional Wellbing
Nicola Couchman, Democratic Services Officer
Lee-Anne Farach, Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive
Aeilish Geldenhuys, Head of Public Health Programmes
James Harman, Head of Children's Services Commissioning
Donna Marriott, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care
Sue Mullin, Associate Director, Children's Mental Health Kent and Medway ICB
David Reynolds, Head of Revenue Accounts

662 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Barrett, Gulvin, Gurung, Spring and Lenny Williams (C of E Diocese Representative).

663 Record of meeting

The record of the meeting held on 11 January 2024 was agreed and signed by the Chairperson as correct.

664 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were none.

The Chairperson welcomed the new teacher representative, Alice Pledger to her first meeting of the Committee.

The Chairperson on behalf of the Committee thanked Donna Marriott, Assistant Director Children's Social Care for her commitment to the service and all her hard work over the years, wishing her all the best in her secondment with the Government of Jersey.

665 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 Animashaun declared that she was a governor at New Road Primary School and Brompton Westbrook.

Sharon Docherty declared that she was a governor at St Marys school Gillingham.

Councillor Nestorov declared that he was a governor at Barnsole Primary School.

Councillor Perfect declared that he was a Beyond Schools and Inspire Partnership Academy Trust Member.

666 Meeting Theme: Children's Social Care

Discussion:

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The Assistant Director introduced the report and gave a presentation which detailed the improvement journey progress in the service as well as workforce, and the following were highlighted:

- There had been a restructure of the adolescent service which moved the service into the whole social work team, had enabled more capacity for the management of workloads and had resulted in fewer complaints.
- The service for disabled children had been restructured which meant there was improved support for families. There was still a lot of work to be done to improve plans and extensive work was being undertaken on commissioning of services. Work was underway on development of a sufficiency strategy, creation of framework and to improve on the offer for children.
- There had been an increase in supervision and management oversight, this area still required improvement, but steps were being taken to move in the right direction.
- Turnover of social workers remained high, vacancy rates although high remained stable against context of national increase.

Members raised several questions and comments which included:

Vulnerable Adolescents – in response to a question on partnership working to tackle issues experienced by vulnerable adolescents, the officer said that there was cross cutting work across all services in the Council to respond to concerns about adolescents. This involved a whole spectrum of joined up work right from early intervention through to youth services. Partnerships had been strengthened in recent years, particularly with other services such as housing and the police.

It was further asked whether, through the merging of adolescent services across the whole social work service, there had been a loss of any specialist knowledge. The officer said that the adolescent services was originally a standalone service. In an attempt to have all specialist expertise in one place, consequently due to the small size of the team and the increasing number of young people over the years with complex needs, the capacity of the team to manage had been compromised. Moving the service into the social work teams allowed for more capacity to adequately respond to needs and provided valuable management oversight. The importance of specialist knowledge was however recognised and would continue to be built and strengthened.

Reduction in children in need – clarification was sought about the reference in the report made to a concerted effort to reduce the number of children in need cases. The officer said that due to the difficulties experienced with capacity, specialist project teams were brought in to work on cases to improve timeliness and step up or down cases appropriately. This piece of work was about ensuring the right plans were in place and children were in the correct part of the service at the right time.

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Complaints – it was asked what the situation was with complaints. The officer said that not all complaints were dealt with through the formal three stage process as there were several methods used to manage concerns and deal with complaints received.

Recruitment - in response to questions on the use of social media as a marketing tool to engage with and attract workforce to Medway, the officer confirmed that as part of the latest recruitment campaign there was a focus on use of social media platforms including Twitter (X), which had generated interest and resulted in some conversions. The recruitment market remained challenging.

It was further asked what changes were being made to enable increased retention of staff. The officers acknowledged that retention remained a challenge not only for Medway but nationally. In addressing this, there was a strong focus on investing in, and growing own staff. There was still a high locum rate with more to be done to ensure ability to not only attract but to retain permanent staff.

Sufficiency - it was asked how the payment structure and Medpay would improve performance. The officer said that sufficiency was improving and there was an attractive remuneration offer in place but there were still issues with capacity. Issues with performance had improve but members were reminded this was due to several factors, and addressing this was an area of focus for staff and management.

Staff wellbeing - in response to questions on what was in place to support staff wellbeing, the officer said that there was an extensive wellbeing offer in place which included practice development team support, access to care first, training opportunities, mentoring, and coaching.

Missing Children – it was asked whether there was a structured multiagency approach to tackling issues, particularly a strong partnership with the Police. The officer confirmed that there was a strengthened partnership in place with Kent Police who had a specialist safeguarding team that dealt specifically with missing children. The team worked in the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub which consisted of front-line social workers. The challenge was dealing with cases of missing Medway children outside of the borough.

Decision:

- 1) The Committee noted the Improvement Update Report, and the steps taken to drive and sustain ongoing improvements.
- 2) The Committee noted that maintaining a focus on improving services and embedding changes will significantly contribute to better outcomes for children and families in Medway.
- 3) The Committee noted the children's services workforce update, the challenges, and barriers to recruiting a permanent workforce and the steps taken to drive progress.

- 4) The Committee noted that improving workforce stability will significantly contribute to better outcomes for children and families in Medway.

a Improvement Update

Discussion of this Item can be found at minute number 666.

b Children's Services Workforce Update

Discussion of this Item can be found at minute number 666.

c Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services

Discussion:

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

Members raised several questions and comments which included:

Members were pleased that the voice of children and families continued to be heard and taken into consideration.

Support for Medway Youth Council - it was asked how future members of young people that represent Medway, could be better supported. The Cabinet Member thanked the Youth Council following attendance at their annual conference that took place on 26 January 2024. There was continued support through the work done by the Mayor, visiting schools and utilising the Medway Parents and Carers Forum, to encourage more young people, in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds to come forward to join the Youth Council. The excellent work that the Medway Youth Council did was celebrated and promoted at every opportunity.

School Transport - it was asked if the issues with school transport had been resolved and if alternatives to streamlining the current process had been explored. The Cabinet Member informed the Committee that all issues were discussed at the School Transport Board. School Transport was a statutory service and any changes made were consulted on. Parents were asked to come forward with suggestions on streamlining the service and a list of suggestions had been collated that would be explored. In terms of the various routes used during journeys, more work had been done with the providers to map out and test that routes avoided roadworks and there was confidence that some of the issues previously experienced would not occur again.

Youth Offending - it was asked what oversight there was on the situation at His Majesty's Youth Offenders Institution Cookham Wood and the Youth Offending service. The Cabinet Member reassured Members that there was management oversight of the institution and discussions had taken place with the external advisor on the situation which needed time to turn around. A visit

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to Cookham Wood was planned for the near future. The Youth Offending team was thanked for the open night event that took place on 23 January 2024 which was well attended by Councillors. The work of the team and difference made to the lives of previous offenders was commended.

SEND and EHCP- it was commented that requests for EHCP's had reduced by 45% and it was asked what 2.6% funding increase meant for overall provision. Additionally, thoughts were sought on the Chancellors' budget announcement for new special free schools. The Cabinet Member said that there were already some free schools in Medway, with construction underway for a special school that would provide 100 extra places, 50 for children with autism and 50 for children with social and emotional needs. The budget announcements for new special free schools were noted and we would await any further opportunities this may mean for Medway. The provisions made by the Council for more SEND children being able to attend mainstream schools was welcomed but it was important that specialist support continued to be provided in each setting. The re-opening of Eden House was positive in ensuring more in-house provision locally, for Medway children.

It was further asked how the impact of the reduction in EHCP's were being monitored. The Cabinet Member reminded Members that part of the national movement in reducing the number of EHCP's was for provision of resources in mainstream schools to support need. The impact of this would be monitored closely.

It was commented that it was vital to monitor the situation and ensure that children with SEND and those on ECHP's do not fall through the gap through their transition to adulthood.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report.

d Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Education

Discussion:

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

Members raised several questions and comments which included:

Promoting Medway Youth Council – it was asked how the Cabinet Member promoted the Youth Council, the Cabinet Member said that she enjoyed working with the Youth Council on projects. It was vital that the Council continued to hear and take into consideration the voices of young people in Medway. Children from schools under the Westbrook Trust had recently been welcomed to attend and hold their own full Council meeting which was chaired by the Mayor.

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School estates - in response to a question that a recent survey highlighted that some school buildings and facilities were inadequate The Cabinet Member said that 80% of schools in Medway were Academies and responsibilities for estates lied with the Department for Education. Schools were able to apply for additional funding for maintenance. In terms of Local Authority Maintained schools, there was a rolling programme of maintenance in place.

Elective home education - in response to a question on what support was provided at children's hubs to address gaps in attainment, the Cabinet Member said that parents and carers had the right to educate children at home. There were currently approximately 870 children out of 50,000 receiving this form of education. Prior to taking children off the school roll, discussions took place to ensure the right decision was being taken. Work was underway to strengthen social inclusion and offer more support to families to encourage them to keep children in school. Home education advisors contacted parents to arrange visits at home and this service was also available at the hubs.

Sufficiency – it was asked what provision was made for early years, the Cabinet Member said that the Early Years Strategy was in place to ensure sufficient places for all young children in Medway and additional funding was being sought to address shortfall in overheads.

It was further asked what progress had been made to address challenges with primary school places in areas of Medway such as Gillingham, the Cabinet Member acknowledged the increase in demand for school places which was driven by inward migration and recruitment by the Hospital which had contributed to an increase in families moving into Gillingham. A few schools had provided bulge classes and there was ongoing work with schools and the regional schools director on how to address the increase in demand.

School attendance - it was asked what more was being done to tackle attendance issues and the Cabinet Member said there were several factors that contributed to low attendance which then led to gaps in attainment. This continued to be an area of priority for schools as well as the Council. The attendance advisory service, as well as dedicated DfE advisor continued to provide support. Medway was part of the Kent and Medway Attendance Alliance, and all this contributed to the efforts to return, in the immediate future, to pre pandemic attendance levels.

Adolescent mental health – concern was raised on the increase in mental health issues in young people and the transition support in place from primary to secondary school. The Cabinet Member acknowledged the rise in mental health needs since the pandemic and that this remained an area of concern and high priority for all partners, The capacity of health services had been stretched due to increase in demand which meant that schools had to commission more inhouse support for pupils. Transition from primary to secondary was a daunting time for children but secondary schools were well equipped in preparing children through various visits and taster days. There were also additional support measures in place for SEND children.

Post 16 support for Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) - it was asked what apprenticeship opportunities were available for SEND children. The Cabinet Member said that a recent review into post 16 provision had been undertaken. Information was gathered from young people that in some cases they felt their options were limited and as a result, an action plan was being devised to ensure that young people were equipped with information on all options available including T levels. More recently, officers had worked with, and expanded, the post 16 offer for all young people including those with SEND, at Mid KENT College. The offer included more apprenticeships, vocational courses, and opportunities for work experience.

The Cabinet Member added that she wanted there to be more opportunities for young people to remain in Medway when they completed their education, and the relevant Cabinet Members were working to develop opportunities through investment.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report.

667 Children and Young People's Mental Health Future Contracts

Discussion:

The Associate Director for Children's Mental Health Kent and Medway ICB, supported by colleagues, presented the report.

Members raised several questions and comments which included:

The list of aspirations described in the report was encouraging but more consistency was needed to be built into all contracts to ensure that families did not have to retell their story every time they met with a new section of the service. It was also important to manage the wait times for assessment. The officer said that one of the ambitions was to streamline experience and do things differently by being inclusive. The lengthy wait time for assessment was acknowledged and work was being done to improve this as well as the quality of contact.

Contracts – it was asked what flexibility there was surrounding the built in service reviews to allow for fluctuations in funding and mitigate future risks. The officer said that having 10 year contracts in place was unusual and there has been some learning from Surrey Council which meant that things would be done differently going forward. It was envisaged that the voluntary and non NHS sector would be the driving force to attract people to mental health careers. Growth must be considered, and contracts needed to be able to respond to financial growth and respond to challenge. The ability to assess and review would be built into the contract framework going forward.

Trusted adult - in response to a question on the support to be provided to trusted adults and the monitoring and review of skill sets, the officer said that

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extensive time was being spent on the specification to develop this role. There would be a requirement by providers to be cognizant of people they served and to build in roles around lived experience. There would be an expectation of providers to actively engage with communities. The ability by the team to deliver workshops had allowed for engagement and the ability to understand the pressures faced regarding children and young people's mental health.

It was commented that there was a discrepancy highlighted in appendix c to the report, between young males and females needs and demand for services, as suicide was one of the biggest killers of young males and it was asked if there were different levels of access for men and women. The officer said that males and females tend to present differently and agreed that suicide was the biggest killer of young males. More data needed to be gathered but the data reflected what was occurring nationally.

Communication - it was asked how services would be informed about changes. The officer said that there would be engagement through workshops and once that was in place there would be a significant mobilization plan over a six month period. GPs, schools, and all services would be advised on how to refer, and families would also be informed on how to access services.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report, supported the contracting approach described in the report and that NHS Kent and Medway continue to provide regular updates to the Committee as the work progresses.

668 Council Plan Performance Monitoring Report and Strategic Risk Summary - Quarter 3 2023/24

Discussion:

The Director of Children's Services and Deputy Chief Executive introduced the report which detailed performance in Q3 2023/24 on the delivery of priorities and the actions being taken to improve performance.

Decision:

- 1) The Committee noted the Q3 2023/24 performance against the measures used to monitor progress against the Council's priorities.

669 Capital Budget Monitoring - Round 3 2023/24

Discussion:

The Head of Revenue Accounts introduced the report and informed Members that there was an underspend of £51,000.00 in the remit of this Committee.

Decision:

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- 1) The Committee noted the results of the third round of capital budget monitoring for 2023/24 and the management actions to resolve the projected overspend in Children's and Adults.
- 2) The Committee noted the changes made to the capital programme as set out in 8.1 to 8.3 to the report.
- 3) The Committee noted that Cabinet of 13 February 2024 recommended to Council the removal of the following budget relating to a scheme that is complete or no longer required:
 - Aiming Higher for Children with Disabilities, funded from Capital Grants.

670 Revenue Budget Monitoring 2023/24 Round 3

Discussion:

The Head of Revenue Accounts introduced the report and informed Members that out of the projected overspend of £11.4million, there was £2.3million in the remit of this Committee which was set out in section 5 to the report. Changes to levels of reserves agreed by Full Council on 29 February 2024 were set out in section 7 of the report. and that resources that could be reclassified would lower the overall spend.

It was asked if declassification was done just to bolster the budget or if they were genuinely reserves that were no longer needed. The officer said they had gone through each one to determine if still required for their original purpose and that where they were found not to be, the recommendation was for them to be moved from earmarked to general reserves to enable the council to fund a possible overspend of the level projected in previous rounds of monitoring. Work would need to be undertaken to replenish the general reserves in the future.

Decision:

- 1) The Committee noted the results of the third round of revenue budget monitoring for 2023/24.
- 2) The Committee noted that Cabinet instructed the Corporate Management Team to implement further urgent actions to bring expenditure back within the budget agreed by Full Council.
- 3) The Committee noted that Council, at its meeting on 29 February 2024, agreed to declassify the following amounts currently held in earmarked reserves and transfer them to general reserves:
 - £4.00million held in the South Medway Development Reserve,
 - £1.00million held in the Transformation Reserve, and

- £727,000 held in the Mosaic Forms Reserve.

671 Work programme

Discussion:

The work programme was presented for information.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report, agreed the work programme as set out at Appendix 1 to the report, and accepted the proposed changes, outlined in italic text on Appendix 1.

Chairperson

Date:

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