

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

Thursday, 1 August 2024

6.30pm to 9.50pm

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), Campbell, Gulvin, Hamilton, Jackson, Joy, Perfect and Spring

Added members without voting rights:

Alice Pledger (Teacher Representative) and Lisa Scarrott
(Medway Parent and Carers Forum)

Substitutes: Councillors:
Hamandishe (Substitute for Animashaun)
Kemp (Substitute for Lammas)

In Attendance: Maria Beaney, Finance Business Partner, Education
Mark Breathwick, Assistant Director, Culture and Community
Celia Buxton, Assistant Director, Education and SEND
Kelly Cogger, Head of First Response and Targeted Services
Amy Coombs, Head of Adoption Partnership South East,
Adoption Partnership South East
Ken Dance, Youth Offending Team Manager
Stephanie Davis, Democratic Services Officer
Lee-Anne Farach, Director of People and Deputy Chief
Executive
James Harman, Head of Children's Services Commissioning
Andy McNally-Johnson, Head of Corporate Accounts
Andrada Pepenel, Head of Provider Services
David Reynolds, Head of Revenue Accounts
Catherine Smith, Head of Planning Policy

181 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors, Animashaun, Lammas, Mrs Turpin, Archie Blundell (MYC Chair), Sharon Docherty (Roman Catholic

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Diocese Representative), Leanna Rodgers (Headteacher Representative) and Lenny Williams (C of E Diocese Representative).

182 Record of meeting

The record of the meeting held on 12 June 2024 was agreed and signed by the Chairperson as correct.

183 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were none.

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

185 Meeting Theme: Children's Social Care

The discussion and decision of this item can be found at minute numbers 185a-185d.

a **Medway Youth Justice Plan 2024-25**

Discussion:

The Youth Offending Team Manager introduced the annual report which set out how youth justice would be delivered locally. This new plan was developed in line with the new guidance that was distributed to Local Authorities in March 2024.

Members raised several comments and questions which included:

Young people with additional needs - it was asked how the commissioning of speech and language therapists for young people with additional needs was progressing and the officer said that this had recently been discussed at the Youth Justice Board. There was a national shortage of speech and language therapists, and work was being undertaken with providers to look into innovative solutions as part of the work that the late Director of Public Health

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started, to address challenges with recruitment. A meeting was due to take place to discuss progress on this matter.

Funding – in response to a question on the amount of funding that would be received, the officer said that they were still awaiting confirmation of the final amount but had received confirmation that it would not be less than the previous year.

Education and Training - in response to a query on what achievements and qualifications could be earned by young people, the officer said that the AQA qualification work had been in place for a year and the education responses from young people were presented in the report. Some young people had a negative experience of education, and work on this qualification was being introduced to them in small manageable steps. The AQA offer was in varied areas such as work with children through unpaid work in the community to enable them to gain vital work experience, work in areas of building and construction, music as well as other areas of interest. The aim of the qualification offer was to identify young people's areas of interest and to support them in developing skills that they could utilise in later life.

Data on first time offenders - it was asked how data on first time offenders was being used to support the work of the team. The officer explained that data was collated and shared quarterly at the National Youth Justice Board. A deep dive had been undertaken on backgrounds of the young people and the types of offences they commit but there was more work that needed to be undertaken on understanding their experiences. Detailed work on first time offenders was a priority for this year and further details would be provided to the Committee, including data on outcome 22 to enable members to analyse trends.

Female Offending - in response to a question on understanding female offending, the officer said that whilst boys and girl offending was different, the approach of the team was for all young people to have a strong focus on identity, who they were, who they wanted to be and how to achieve their aspirations. It was however important to understand the nuances and that everyone was an individual, listening to their experiences, how they perceive their identities and responding appropriately. It was important to ensure that all young people were treated as individuals.

Retention of staff- it was asked how invested management was in development of staff and the officer said that he was very proud and lucky to work with an exceptional team who were motivated and committed to continuous development. He was also proud of the diverse and rich background of the team.

Decision:

The Committee recommended Full Council to approve the Medway Youth Justice Plan 2024 – 2025.

b Adoption Partnership South East, Regional Adoption Agency Annual Report 2023/24

Discussion:

The Head of Adoption Partnership South East introduced the annual report which detailed the service activity and practice development for the period April 2023 – March 2024.

Members raised several comments and questions which included:

Wait times – it was asked what could be done to further reduce the wait times for prospective adopters and children waiting to be adopted. The officer said that the wait time at stage one of the process was high nationally and this was due to the stringent checks that must be carried out to ensure that safe decisions regarding placement of children were being made. In the last year, in Medway there had been an increase between placement orders, to point of matching. Eighteen children had placement orders granted, out of which, there were two children with extremely complex needs, including life limiting conditions, which meant it took longer for them to be matched.

Partnership working – it was asked how effective the partnership working was in light of the fact that Kent was dominant due to its size and scale and how officers ensured that the needs of Medway children continued to be met. The Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive said she was pleased with the partnership, it worked very well. At the time Medway had joined the partnership, both local authorities already in the partnership were outstanding. Medway's performance was inadequate and both authorities were gracious with their time and resources and through the partnership Medway had made significant improvements. This was evident from the last ILACS inspection.

Wrap around support – the work being done to support adopters of children with complex needs was commended and it was asked what wrap around support was provided post adoption. The officer said that they continued to raise awareness with partners about the needs of these children, who were the most vulnerable in the community and had met with the Integrated Care Board who had agreed that adoptive children would be a priority in the commissioning processes. It was acknowledged that families struggle post adoption and funding had been received from the Department for Education for a pan regional approach pilot scheme in keeping connected with families. Many parents did not always reach out for support until they reached crisis point and this scheme would enable officers to maintain contact at crucial stages. There was also work being undertaken to develop a strong post adoption community peer support network.

Currently, there were currently 40 peer mentors who buddied up with families and provided support from the beginning of the adoption process right through to placement, they built relationships with families which often continued for many years. There were currently five community groups and officers were

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exploring how to develop more. A coffee shop morning run by adopters was due to be launched and adoption picnics regularly took place.

Budget - it was noted that there was an under spend and it was asked what would happen with the funds. The Finance Business Partner said that there was an underspend of £328,000, of which if returned, £66,000 would be Medway's share. When there was an underspend, the Board would make a decision on whether the amount should be returned to the Local Authority or rolled forward to the following year's budget. It was unknown at this stage whether the underspend would come back to the Local Authority as it had in previous years due to challenges in the system.

Deregistration - in response to a question on what was being done to avoid deregistration, the officer said that this was a decision made by adopters that had been approved then decided not to continue for various reasons. Officers did work to identify and provide support where necessary.

Decision:

The Committee noted the annual report as set out at Appendix 1, which outlined the activity that had taken place across the Adoption Partnership South East between April 2023 – March 2024.

c Annual Fostering Report 2023-2024

Discussion:

The Head of Provider Services, Children and Adults, presented the report which detailed a summary of business and operations of the service for 2023-2024 and set out the aims and objectives for the next financial year.

Members raised several comments and questions which included:

Recruitment – in response to a comment that there had been a year on year decline in foster carers, the officer acknowledged that recruitment and retention remained a challenge, not just locally but was experienced nationally. There were ongoing campaigns, including being part of the south east recruitment hub and ongoing media recruitment to address workforce issues.

It was further asked what was behind some of the loss of foster carers and the officer said there were various reasons, including retirement, transfer to other local authorities and personal reasons.

Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) - it was asked what was behind some foster carers leaving to join IFA's. The officer said this was a personal decision, which could be driven by various factors such as the packages offered or being able to specialise in specific areas. The team responded to this by offering other various means of support and specialised training where appropriate.

Spare Bedroom - it was commented that one of the difficulties for prospective carers was not having a spare bedroom. The officer acknowledged the issues faced with spare bedrooms and would continue to work with other colleagues, in particular the Planning department, to ensure that Medway's plans for properties were mindful of fostering regulations.

Decision:

The Committee noted the Fostering Service Annual Report 2023-2024.

d Regional Care Co-Operative (RCC) and Aut Even Development Update

Discussion:

The Head of Children's Services Commissioning introduced the report which outlined Medway's involvement in the Regional Care Co-operative (RCC) pilot (Southeast region) and subsequent successful DFE Capital Grant awarded to Medway Council of £912,872. This was significant as it would enable children's services to tackle some of its sufficiency issues. The funding would be utilised as part of the renovation of Aut Even and support the Eden House project.

Members raised several comments and questions which included:

- The plans and funding were welcomed as part of the Council's ambition to provide more in house service for children and young people.
- It was encouraging that children and families would be consulted on proposals.
- This step in reducing the number of children's placements outside of Medway was welcomed.

Budget for training – in response to a question on whether part of the funding could be utilised for training, the officer said that this was a capital only grant. There was a financial model in place for Aut Even and most of the costing for equipment would be included in this budget, but staffing and associated costs were separate to this grant funding.

Timeline – in response to a question on the timeline for completion of the project, the officer said that notification of the funding was only received in the last month. The next stage was for proposals to be presented at the procurement board in the next few weeks. It was envisaged that this project would take approximately two years to full completion, this would include building work, recruitment of staff and Ofsted inspection before opening. The Committee requested an update on progress in six months.

Sustainability - it was asked how success would be measured in particular due to the high cost associated with running a specialised service. The officer said that it was vital to share resources within the Council's own provision and it was important to continue to grow our own and invest in inhouse provision. All staff across the 3 Council suites would be trained across all suites which would be an advantage and provide the ability for staff to be moved around if needed.

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Officers would continue to explore and bid for any grants available to enable that growth and had recently secured funding from the DfE to enable the launch of a residential apprenticeship programme.

Sufficiency - it was commented that the report mentioned that this project was a step towards Medway's vision of building a suite of internal provision and clarification was sought. The officer said that Parklands was now open, they were awaiting an Ofsted inspection of Eden House and Aut Even would be third unit, and in the next 12 months there may be further proposals brought to Cabinet for decision. There would be a minimum of three, with up to twelve young people that could be housed and up to seven part time on short breaks across the suites.

Governance – in response to a question on governance and decision making of the co-operative, the officer said that this was still being worked through, to ensure that all the local authorities involved were afforded the opportunity to influence decisions and play their part.

Projects - it was commented that in the past, other projects had gone through a Project Board, made up of officers and a Portfolio Holder which worked very well with some of the big projects the Council had undertaken. This may be beneficial for this project.

Decision:

- a) The Committee noted the involvement, implications and aims of being part of the SE RCC pathfinder project.
- b) The Committee noted the external investment into the Aut Even project which is to develop a specialist 5-bedroom home for young people with Learning Disabilities and Autism and neurodiversity.
- c) The Committee recommended that an update report be provided to the Committee on progress in six months.
- d) The Committee recommended that consideration be given to this project being part of a Project Board to comprise of Officers as well as the Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People and The Portfolio Holder for Regeneration, Culture and Environment.

186 Medway Local Plan Regulation 18 Consultation

Discussion:

The Assistant Director Culture and Community and the Head of Planning Policy introduced the report and gave a presentation which set out proposals for potential growth across Medway and policies to manage development.

Members raised several comments and questions which included:

It was vital to put together a plan that reflects the aspirations of the children and young people of Medway.

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Schools - it was expressed that serious consideration needed to be given to development of secondary schools as part of the plan. The officer said that due to the length of the plan and scale of developments, the requirement for schools was anticipated and they continued to work with the school planning team on what was needed. The Assistant Director of Education and SEND added that it was anticipated that a new secondary school would be needed by 2028, aside from the one new secondary school, there were no others in the pipeline. It was important that plans for new secondary schools come through via the DfE or the Council would have to fund a new school. Even with the Section 106 funding, there would still be a shortfall as it was anticipated that the new secondary school would cost a minimum of £40million and it was vital to continue to press the DfE for funding support.

Infrastructure - in response to a comment that the report referred to ambitions for a healthier Medway and that increased focus on addressing children's health and access to activities should be central to the plan, officers agreed that all residents should be able to access activities to promote a healthier lifestyle. There was more work to be undertaken on the infrastructure delivery plan which would support the preferred spatial strategy as it was important to fully understand what was needed and where in Medway.

Engagement - it was asked what was being done to engage with young people and getting their views and perspectives on their Plan, the officer said they were working with several partnerships and networks, including the use of focus groups and specific targeted activities. Officers were due to present to Medway Youth Council at the end of August, were working with Mid Kent College as well and trying to feed into various events taking place across Medway. There were also some targeted social media campaigns directed at younger audiences that were being considered. It was acknowledged however that there was a need to invest in wider relationships and feed into other policies and strategies and more needed to be done on an ongoing basis to capture the views of young people beyond the initial consultation stage. It was acknowledged that the timing of the consultation impacted responses and officers would need to further explore how to target schools to promote increased participation. The Assistant Director Education and SEND added that details had been shared with all schools and Child Friendly Medway was undertaking some work around the Plan.

Consultation – in response to a question on how it would be ensured that the consultation encompassed the views of the whole of Medway, the officer said that prior to submission of the Plan, they had to demonstrate that the assessment and choices made were based on evidence gathered throughout the process which may include the views of the public.

Climate Change - in response to a question on how the Plan supports Climate Change which young people were concerned and passionate about, the officer confirmed that Climate Change was central to the Plan and ensuring that the Local Plan would meet the wider objectives of the Council's Climate Change Action Plan.

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Green Spaces - in response to a question on what was being done to preserve green spaces, the officer said that they worked extensively to ensure that green spaces remain protected, and this had been updated in the provision.

Training Flats – in response to a request for consideration to be given to provision of training flats for care experienced children who were at the stage of leaving care to support their transition to adulthood, the officer said that this could be explored further by the housing team to explore how the current housing stock and registered providers could support such a scheme.

Decision:

- a) The Committee noted the report.
- b) The Committee recommended that officers ensure that future reports contain child specific policies and user friendly language to be used.

187 Capital Budget Monitoring - Round 1 2024/25

Discussion:

The Head of Corporate Accounts introduced the report which presented the results of the first round of the Council's capital budget monitoring process for 2024/25. This is the first assessment of the year, estimated costs for current year and capital for future years.

Members raised several comments and questions which included:

School Budget - it was asked if refit funding was being used for improvement of energy efficiencies for schools as it would assist to reduce their budgets in the longer term. The officer said that there were specific funding streams for schools including government grants given each year to assist schools and was not aware of any other funding schemes available.

Victory Academy- it was asked why funding had been lost by Victory Academy to merge basic needs projects with the SEMH project and what Greenacre had done to mitigate increased costs. The Assistant Director of Education and SEND explained that the project delivered at Victory Academy was also for SEND pupils. The projects were delivered as planned; they were not changed. The construction costs meant that there were more efficiencies on the Victory Academy delivery and the costs for the Greenacre School increased. This was an allocated budget, and efficiencies were realised due to completion of both pieces of work together at the same time. The Finance Business Partner added that when they commission projects, they were done on an individual basis, however it was sometimes possible to combine projects and commission as one and this allowed the ability to generate cost efficiencies.

Decision:

- a) The Committee noted the results of the first round of capital budget monitoring for 2024/25.

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- b) The Committee noted that Cabinet of 31 July 2024 were asked to approve a virement of £500,000 from the projected underspend on the scheme at Victory Academy to the Greenacre Academy scheme to cover a projected overspend on that scheme.

188 Revenue Budget Monitoring - Round 1 2024/25

Discussion:

The Head of Revenue Accounts introduced the report which presented the results of the first round of the Council's revenue budget monitoring process for 2024/25.

Members raised several comments and questions which included:

Overspend - concern was expressed regarding overspend and it was asked what measures had been built in for savings to be realised going forward. The officer said that the areas of overspend were in recruitment, legal costs, placement costs and SEN transport and the directorate continued to explore ways to manage overspend. The forecast for overspend were based on early data and were possibly more prudent than required. The Council had now moved onto a monthly monitoring process which would provide early indication of financial positions and allowed timely responses to address issues. The finance department would continue to work with the directorate as well as all directorates across the Council to formulate plans to address budget overspend.

The Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive added that it was important to remember that demand was still high and whilst there were plans in place such as workforce strategy and forecasting of agency staffing to manage trajectory, the safeguarding of children must continue to be maintained.

Officers would seek a meeting with Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government to discuss all issues faced across the Council as a whole and actions being taken.

Savings -it was asked what potential savings could be made on completion of the Aut even and Eden House project, the Assistant Director for Education and SEND responded that whilst she did not have the exact breakdown in savings, the more work done to ensure that Medway children were placed locally, the more savings would be made. A full review of SEN and Mainstream transport had been completed, the outcome of which reflected that the Council was paying the right amount.

In response to a question on the 10% overspend in provider services, the Finance Business Partner said that Eden House sits within those pressures. They were working to ensure that the project was up and running as soon as possible and were awaiting Ofsted approval. Once the project was underway, savings would start to be delivered.

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Decision:

- a) The Committee noted the results of the first round of revenue budget monitoring for 2024/25.
- b) The Committee noted that Cabinet of 31 July 2024 is asked to instruct the Corporate Management Team to implement urgent actions to bring expenditure back within the budget agreed by Full Council.

189 Work Programme

Discussion:

The work programme was presented for information.

It was suggested and agreed that a report be presented to the Committee on Secure Schools at a future meeting of the Committee.

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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