

Report of:	Sue Butcher: Executive Director of Children's Services Cllr Antony High: Deputy Mayor and Lead Member for Children's Social Care
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Submitted to:	Executive - 14 July 2020
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Subject:	Children's Services Improvement Programme: Update Report
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Summary

Proposed decision(s)
That Executive approves <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The direction of the Children's Services Improvement Plan 2020/2023. The overview of the strategic and operational work being undertaken in line with the Children's Services Improvement Action Plan 2020/21

Report for:	Key decision:	Confidential:	Is the report urgent?¹
Discussion	Yes	No	No

Contribution to delivery of the 2020-23 Strategic Plan		
People	Place	Business
Reference to the Children Services Improvement Plan is made throughout the report. This plan contributes to the delivery of the strategic plan.		

Ward(s) affected
All

¹ Remove for non-Executive reports

What is the purpose of this report?

1. To brief members of the Executive on the direction of the Children's Services Improvement Plan 2020/21 and give an overview of the strategic and operational actions being undertaken against the Children's Services Action Plan 2020/21. The overall aim is to improve outcomes for Middlesbrough's vulnerable children, young people, families and carers.

Why does this report require a Member decision?

2. It is crucial that members of the Executive have a line of sight on the improvement work being undertaken and the impact that it is having on family life in Middlesbrough. This will inform any challenges they wish to make on the progress being made and hold officers to account as appropriate.

Report Background

Context

3. Children's Services in Middlesbrough were subject to an Ofsted ILACS inspection (Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services) in November/December 2019. The report, published in January 2020 evidenced that services were inadequate across all categories:
 - The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection
 - The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers
 - The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families.
4. In such circumstances the Department of Education (DfE) appoints a Commissioner to further examine services and hold discussions with a variety of stakeholders including members and children and young people. The commissioner then makes recommendations to the Minister as to whether the Council should retain control of its services or whether they should be delivered through an Alternative Delivery Model.
5. Our Commissioner, Peter Dwyer began working with us on 3rd March 2020 and quite unusually but understandably he had an additional task which was to take a view on whether the DfE should continue to fund our Futures for Families (No Wrong Door) project.
6. Peter submitted his report at the end of April 2020. The minister subsequently accepted his recommendation that Middlesbrough should retain control of its services including the Future for Families Project and the report and the confirmatory letter from the minister were published in May 2020. Our experience of working with Peter was a positive one and we are pleased that he will now work with us for three days per month and will submit further reports to the minister in November 2020 and May 2021.
7. Immediately following the inspection a 12 week Assurance plan was put in place to begin to address the most pressing practice deficits. This has developed into a wider overarching three year improvement plan for 2020/2023 and the first of three, 2020/2021 one year action plans. The overarching plan cross references the 15 recommendations made in the inspection report and introduces the three themes which will shape our work going forward. They are Quality and Performance, Leadership and Management and Governance and Partnerships.

8. Two multi-agency boards, one operational and one strategic have been put in place since the inspection. The operational board chaired by Director of Children's Services is responsible for monitoring the improvement plan and reporting on an exception basis to the strategic board. The latter has an independent chair namely John Pearce Director of Children's Services in Durham and attendees include Cllr High and Cllr Cooper and the lead members covering the entirety of Children's Services.
9. Our progress as originally planned has undoubtedly been affected by the pandemic but we have found other ways of seeking to improve practice such as focussing on writing safety plans for our vulnerable children – every child with a social worker. The quality of some of these plans has been variable but it is an achievement that approximately 2,700 children, young people and care leavers received a plan. Children with Education, Health and Care Plans are also deemed to be vulnerable and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Service worked with these children and their families to write 1,300 risk assessment. This work should also be commended.
10. The following is an overview of the current work against the three improvement themes.

Quality and Performance,

11. Middlesbrough's own Multi-Agency Children's Hub, the front door to Children's Services has been disaggregated from the joint arrangement with Redcar and Cleveland and will be based in Middlesbrough House alongside our assessment service. It is set to go live on 1st July 2020. Thank you to our colleagues in partner agencies but particularly those in Redcar and Cleveland Children's Services for their support us to make this happen. This work should not be seen as not wanting to work in partnership with other local authorities but if we want to make the progress that we need to at our front door and with the necessary pace then disaggregation was a necessity. Consideration will be given to re-joining with Redcar at a later date although no timescale has been set for these discussions. Our MACH has been offered support by some of our education colleagues and this will be welcomed particularly as part of the MACH governance group.
12. Innovate, an agency commissioned to provide bespoke social work teams for finite period of time has given us some extra capacity in terms of auditing our children on child protection plans due to neglect, a theme from the inspection and two teams have been with us for 12 weeks adding extra capacity during the pandemic. The audit team funded by the Ofsted resource plan agreed by the Executive on 18th February, finished their specific task some weeks ago although we have retained two excellent auditors on separate contracts, also funded by the Ofsted resource plan to assist in embedding audit into everyday practice this includes the voice of the child. Audits can be extremely challenging for social workers as it is hard to be faced with deficits in your practice however they are receiving support to improve where necessary. It is also crucial to build a culture of High Support but High Challenge as inspectors did not see the latter during the inspection period. The two other teams, badged against COVID spend will finish their work on 26th June. In general terms this exercise has been a success in that they have provided additional support during the most intensive period of the pandemic and this has supported Middlesbrough's social workers to work as normally as possible with the children on their caseloads.

13. As a result of an 'invest to save' bid Innovate are now being commissioned to provide a small team to concentrate on working with our young people in external residential placements, those in fragile foster placements and those that are currently looked after but need to move on to permanence. In terms of the young people in external residential placements Innovate will assess if these young people can come back into Middlesbrough either into our own residential provision, be stepped down into a foster placement or return home to their families if it is safe to do so. We have 71 young people in such placements and we know that for some of them their original care plans, such as to move to permanence in a foster placement, have not been carried out. The team will be with us for six months and even if they only succeed with a small number of young people the costs will be offset by the savings on residential placements. The average cost of an external residential placement is £3,200 per week. The highest cost currently is £7,385 for a young person in a secure placement.
14. The average case load across the service is currently in line with the caseload target of 15 -20 children per worker however the numbers and the complexity of the work with individual families varies from worker to worker and caseloads in the Safeguarding and Care Planning service (SCP) are significantly higher than desired. There a number of factors contributing to this for example the surge of work into the assessment service earlier in the year has now moved through into SCP, the throughput of work is not effective and some work cannot be progressed as would be expected during COVID, for example court work, although the extent of the latter has yet to be completely evaluated. This issue has undoubtedly affected morale and the leadership team is looking at ways to alleviate the pressure in the service both in the short term e.g. transferring work to the Children Looked After service, where caseloads are lower taking place sooner than set out in the Transfer Protocol and in the longer term improving practice so that children move to their forever homes in a more robust and timely way.
15. Middlesbrough is already working with North Yorkshire in the Futures for Families (FFF) project but we are now looking at how we can work together as Partners in Practice to embed the ethos of FFF across other areas of our practice. This is an exciting development and details can be presented to Executive at a later date. The other authority keen to work with us is North Tyneside and they are looking at our improvement plan to see where they can most add value. It is important to stress that the arrangements with these authorities is based on working in partnership with us; Middlesbrough must choose help wisely and be clear when and where it is needed.
16. Another exciting development is our Centre for Practice Excellence (CPE) a transformational project, led by our Head of Service for transformation to bring together the following into one virtual learning and development space:-
 - A social work academy
 - The Practice Model
 - A best practice hub.
 - Our quality assurance framework.
17. The aim is to create an environment for good social work and social care work to flourish. It will be led by our Principal Social Worker and staff will come into the space from all areas of children's services, including Early Help, Residential Services and Futures for Families. The FFF approach will be embedded in our practice model as mentioned above. The work streams are now progressing including consideration of

the communications strategy and exploring website design as the CPE is intended to play a key role in attracting social workers to come and work in Middlesbrough. We are also developing learning platforms to support training and development and learning lessons from the way we have worked throughout the pandemic.

18. The CPE has the potential to support cultural change across the service and we are recruiting 'Practice Leader' posts to lead the improvement in practice and 'Practice Champions' from across the service for key improvement themes.

Leadership and Management

19. There has been a recent change in some senior line management responsibilities in Children's Services following our Chief Executive's recent restructuring of his leadership team. We now have two directors instead of three as Ian Wright, Director of Business, Performance and Change has moved to become the Director of Finance and the post has been deleted. This has given an opportunity to streamline children's service and an example of this is moving the Children with Disability Service to work directly to the Head of Service for Special Educational Needs and Vulnerable Learners. Robust matrix management arrangements will be put in place to ensure that there is the appropriate social work oversight.
20. The Early Help service is moving from Education, Prevention and Partnership into Children's Care with the exception of school readiness which will stay with the same director and be line managed by the Head Achievement and Inclusion. This means that there is a continuous service offer running through Children's Care for our vulnerable children.
21. The Head of Service Futures for Families will move to Children's Care. He also has Residential Services and the Fostering Service in his portfolio. The exciting news is that Futures for Families is being launched at the end August. Watch out for the publicity nearer the time.
22. Selinda Chouhan, Head of Strategic Services, along with Rachel Farnham, Head of Transformation will support me to bring together a small team to drive and project manage the improvement agenda. They will report directly to me as will the two previously mentioned directors.
23. The work on our Communications Strategy continues and as part of this we have reached out to staff across the authority using Sli.do to ask what they think of #Middlesbrough Children Matter and how they can work to achieve and embed this vision and what support they need to help them do so. The results will be brought to a future meeting of this board. In addition the Head of Service for Youth Offending and Partnerships has asked her staff again via Sli.do how they were feeling about the new working arrangements as a result of COVID. I am pleased to say that the results positive.
24. Following the Clarity and Confidence workshops there is now a Strengthening Practice – Clarity and Confidence programme for first line managers. The outcomes from this training will be considered at the Multi-Agency Operational Improvement Board with any strategic issues also coming to a future meeting of this board.
25. Other work in progress is the embedding the way in which we engage with our young people, for example a Care Leaver has now joined the Children's Social Care Recovery Group and developing a strategic approach to Corporate Parenting, the

sufficiency of placements for children in our care and permanency. All of this work will include input from children and young people.

26. Just to note there is a Facebook page called Corrupt Middlesbrough Social Workers where disenfranchised families post derogatory comments about some of our social workers. This is distressing to staff and although Facebook have not agreed to take it down please be assured that the Director for Legal Services and other colleagues are looking at what can be done to protect them.

Governance and Partnership

27. On 16th June the directors and the Head of Transformation met with Rachel Holden Ofsted senior HMI. She was updated on progress since the Ofsted planning meeting in April and given an updated version of the overarching improvement plan and the one-year 2020/21 action plan. Rachel felt that the latter covered all of the recommendations made in the Ofsted inspection report and were helpfully cross referenced in the three year plan. We will be having a virtual monitoring visit during the week of 28th September focussing on the front door of our service. Monitoring visits are normally on three monthly basis although this may be affected by the COVID. The lead inspector for our monitoring visits is Jan Edwards who was also the lead inspector for our ILACS inspection.
28. An extraordinary meeting of the Children's Trust Board was held recently where partners agreed to review the role and remit of the board and strengthen partnership working at a strategic level in order to support the improvement journey and the #MiddlesbroughChildrenMatter agenda. The terms of reference have been reviewed to reflect the renewed partnership commitment and how the board will now operate. It will pay specific attention to monitoring the Governance and Partnership section of the plan.
29. The South Tees Safeguarding partnership has continued to conduct multi-agency virtual meetings and multi-agency 'deep dive' audits in relation to 'exploitation' have taken place. There are a number of Safeguarding Practice Reviews underway and the learning from the deep dive audits and the reviews, when complete, will be disseminated through the partnership.
30. The multi-agency VEMT (Vulnerable, Exploited, Missing, Trafficked) practitioners group has continued to meet virtually throughout the pandemic. Meetings have increased in frequency and are now on a fortnightly basis. The chair has reported an increase in referrals and although not all of the young people will go on to be discussed at the group there is an increase in those being considered. There are a number of multi-agency complex strategy meetings being held as result of VEMT activity, chaired by Catherine Parry our Director of Children's Care.
31. Significant efforts are being made to ensure that:
 - Children's Services (social care and education services) are seen as one service
 - Children's Services works as part of the wider council
 - Develops partnerships with other agencies working with children particularly schools, health (the CCG and provider services) and the police.

Conclusion

32. There has been a significant amount of activity since Ofsted left the building but it was six months ago. I believe that this is to be commended and that most of the building blocks necessary to improving practice are now in place. However, the focus must turn to recovering from the effects of COVID on work across the whole of children's services and seeing a positive and sustained impact of the activities on outcomes for children. There is still a great deal to do

What decision(s) are being asked for?

33. That Executive approves
- The direction of the Children's Services Improvement Plan 2020/2023.
 - The overview of the strategic and operational work being undertaken in line with the Children's Services Improvement Action Plan 2020/21

Why is this being recommended?

34. It is important that the Executive has oversight of the improvement plans and the improvement work taking place to deliver them.
35. This report does not ask for any additional funding. On 18th February the Executive agreed funding of £3.3million to finance necessary improvement work and additional work related to the pandemic is put against the COVID budget to date.
36. As noted in the report the Commissioner consulted with a range of stakeholders as part of his work to review Children's Services.
37. There have been regular briefings with members and reports to Children's Scrutiny and Overview and Scrutiny Board.

Other potential decisions and why these have not been recommended

38. None

Impact(s) of recommended decision(s)

Legal

39. The work to improve children's services is essentially governed by The Children Act 1989.

Financial

40. See the body of the report

Policy Framework

41. Discussions will be held with Paul Stevens as to how the policies named in the report will fit with the newly proposed policy framework

Equality and Diversity

42. The improvement work promotes effective work with groups who have protected characteristics.

Risk

43. The improvement work is centred on reducing risk to Middlesbrough's most vulnerable children, young people and their families

Actions to be taken to implement the decision(s)

44. All in place,

Appendices

Background papers

Body	Report title	Date
Variously reference.	Children's Services Improvement Plan	Signed off by the Strategic Improvement Board in May 2020

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