

<b>Report of:</b>	Sue Butcher: Executive Director of Children’s Services Cllr Antony High: Deputy Mayor and Lead Member for Children’s Social Care
-------------------	---

<b>Submitted to:</b>	Executive – 24 November 2020
----------------------	------------------------------

<b>Subject:</b>	Children’s Services Improvement Programme: Overview of Progress. June – October 2020.
-----------------	---

**Summary**

<b>Proposed decision(s)</b>
That Executive approves <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The overview of the strategic and operational work undertaken between June – October 2020 in line with the Children’s Services Improvement Action Plan 2020/21</li> </ul>

<b>Report for:</b>	<b>Key decision:</b>	<b>Confidential:</b>	<b>Is the report urgent?<sup>1</sup></b>
Discussion	Yes	No	No

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

<b>Ward(s) affected</b>
All

**What is the purpose of this report?**

- To provide members of the Executive with an overview of the strategic and operational actions undertaken between June – October 2020 against the Children’s Services Action Plan 2020/21. It also sets out the context in which these actions have

<sup>1</sup> Remove for non-Executive reports

been carried out and that of delivering against Children's Services Improvement Plan 2020/23. 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 against the improvement plan and hold officers to account as appropriate.

## **Report Background**

### **Context**

3. Children's Services in Middlesbrough were the subject of a full Ofsted inspection in November/December 2019. The report, published in Jan 2020, evidenced that services were inadequate in all categories. As is usual in such circumstances Department of Education (DfE) appointed a Commissioner, Peter Dwyer an experienced ex Director of Children's Services, to examine our services as a whole and make recommendations to the minister as to whether the council should Alternative Delivery Model. Peter's recommendation *'that there are reasonable grounds to conclude that this is not an LA where alternative delivery models are needed at this stage'* was subsequently accepted by the minister. It was also agreed that he would stay involved with Children's Services on a 2/3 day per month basis and submit further reports to the minister in November 2020 and May 2021.
4. This report is an update covering the period since the receipt of the confirmatory letter from the minister in May until the end of October which coincides with the period that the commissioner will cover in his November 2020. It is written against the three themes in our improvement plan namely Quality and Performance, Leadership and Management and Governance and Partnership.
5. It is important to note that this period has been overshadowed by the COVID virus. This has meant working in different ways, e.g. from home, doorstep visits, virtual visits, virtual family time for birth parents and their children. Ofsted commended the local authority on their rigorous approach to safety planning for children during the Covid19 pandemic.

### **Quality and Performance**

6. Middlesbrough's own Multi-Agency Children's Hub (MACH) went live on 1<sup>st</sup> July. It was disaggregated from the arrangement, whereby Redcar and Cleveland was commissioned to deliver the service on our behalf, because important changes had to be made to practice and although it may have been possible to make them in the joint arrangement it would have taken too long to do so. However, this should not be seen as not wanting to work in partnership with other local authorities particularly in the North East but Middlesbrough needs to work at pace to achieve the objectives set out in our improvement plan. It is important to note that the work to separate the MACHs was a positive piece of partnership working and consideration will be given to re-joining with Redcar at a later date although no timescales have been set for this discussion. The last joint strategic MACH board received a closure report detailing the infrastructure of the MACH, the performance figures and the challenges.

7. Quote from MACH Closing Report.  
*During the year, three significant events have impacted on practice and performance. There is no doubt that there was spike in activity at the 'front door' in January and February 2020, following Middlesbrough's inspection. This, alongside the volume of decision-making challenges from Auditors and Early Help colleagues significantly increased the demand at the front door.*
8. Quote from Middlesbrough's MACH Team Manager  
*The team are all pleased to be back in Middlesbrough and its great being back with our assessment teams again so we can work closely together. I am finding that being back in Middlesbrough is giving me a much greater insight into the improvement work that is happening. I am looking forward to having two new deputy team managers starting with us so we can really start to drive the changes at the front door.*
9. The MACH is governed by a Multi-Agency Strategic Board and has reported on progress to the Multi-Agency Strategic Improvement Board

### **Early Help**

10. The level of demand in our Early Help Service, known here in Middlesbrough as Stronger Families, has increased and staff are carrying high caseloads. To mitigate against this and as part of our recovery planning, the service has recruited additional Senior Practitioners to increase capacity and has refocused the work of all teams to focus on family work. In addition, we have recently welcomed two members of staff to Stronger Families from the voluntary and community sector. These staff are employed by Safer Communities but will be working within Stronger Families through a formal secondment agreement, these staff will be supporting Early Help Practitioners with casework and delivering interventions with families.
11. As part of our response to the COVID 19 situation here in Middlesbrough Stronger Families offered a check in service for families during the 6 week summer holidays, these were children that schools felt that may need support whilst the schools were closed and who did not have a Social Worker or an Early Help Practitioner. During the 6 weeks, families have been contacted and 129 children have been supported over the holiday period.

### **Future for Families. (No Wrong Door)**

12. I am very pleased to inform the Executive that Future for Families, Middlesbrough's service providing support to young people edging towards care and their families was registered by Ofsted on 7<sup>th</sup> September and the service went live on that date providing both in-reach and out-reach support. The service is developing well, referrals have been accepted for 39 young people and support is being given to carers caring for 11 young people with the aim of preventing painful placement breakdowns. The service is currently working alongside the Innovate team (see later in this report) to support young people moving on from external residential placements and three young people receiving support in residential placements whilst foster placements are being sourced. In addition there are brilliant examples of the project offering excellent support to maintain children in fragile placements and to offer care to children in crisis situations. This has allowed children to continue to be cared for in Middlesbrough and continue to attend school whilst appropriate longer term placements are secured and matching requirements are given full

consideration. Due to COVID it is not possible to hold a launch event however a virtual tour of the Hub is being made and can be shared with members of the Executive if required.

13. The Corporate Parenting Strategy, which encompasses our Permanency Strategy – outlining our work with children to move them to their forever homes as swiftly and smoothly as possible, our Sufficiency Strategy – assessing if we have sufficient placements for our children in care and how and where any deficits could be resolved and our Participation Strategy – involving children and young people in our work, was out for consultation during October. A multi-agency planning session is arranged to develop the operational action plan that will sit behind the strategy and will support the local authority and partner agencies to achieve the identified priorities.

### **Participation – the involvement of Children and Young People.**

14. Children and Young People have been involved in:
  - Developing the ‘Tell Us More’ Survey. A process supporting children, young people, parents and carers to give honest feedback on the service that they receive.
  - Reviewing the youth advocacy contract and usage in Middlesbrough. Reviewing the communications with young people, parents, carers and the workforce.
  - Developing the Middlesbrough Children Matter website. This website will be the hub of information for children, young people, parents and carers.
  - Finalising plans for a virtual Youth Council network. Working with Members of Youth Parliament and Cllr High to plan a (virtual) launch.
15. Young People have also been involved in the recruitment of the Director of Children’s Care, a Participation officer and plans for Care Leaver’s week.
16. Our Participation Lead Officer Bethany Bradshaw has reported that it has become challenging to maintain children’s interest as they would like to actually get together in groups as they are tired of virtual involvement. This has contributed to the low numbers of children in our looked after children groups and the care leavers’ forum.
17. Children and young people have also been involved in designing Children’s Services ‘Middlesbrough Children Matter’ logo and our Mission Statement ‘Our Mission is to show Middlesbrough Children that they matter’. Watch out for them on future paperwork. In addition our Middlesbrough Children Matter website will be launched in November. This is later than planned due to technical issues. Work has also been carried out to match behaviours against our corporate values i.e. what do our values look like in practice.

### **Innovate – Commissioned managed teams**

18. The contract commissioning two Innovate teams to support the Assessment service and the Safeguarding and Care Planning Service (SCP) came to an end in June. The project was successful in that it provided valuable additional capacity during the pandemic. However, there is some learning here in terms of successfully ending contracts and reabsorbing any ongoing work.

19. One of the teams has been recommissioned for a further six months beginning on 2<sup>nd</sup> July as part of an 'invest to save' initiative. The team is working with about one hundred children and young people in the following cohorts:
- Children in external residential placements to assess if they can step down to foster placements preferably in the Middlesbrough area or return to live with family and friends where it is safe to do so. We have had up to 74 young people in such placements costing between £3K and £8K per week.
  - Children and young people in fragile placements - undertaking intensive work to prevent placement breakdown and the need for a move to a residential placement.
  - Children needing to be settled in permanent 'forever families'.
  - Children who are looked after and placed at home with parents on a care order where it is appropriate to discharge the order so the child is no longer looked after.
20. This project is the first of its kind in a local authority and we are sharing practice and impact with other authorities through Innovate. To date, the progress of the project has resulted in direct savings in year, 2020-21, estimated to be £385k with a full year effect next financial year of £797k.
21. The most important aspect of this project is achieving permanency for children something Ofsted was criticized for not doing in the full inspection. We still have an extremely high rate of children looked after of 210 per 10,000 population under 18 in the top two nationwide but there has been a small decrease to 688 at the time of writing.
22. The most concerning issue relating to Quality of Practice is significantly high caseloads. Ofsted noted in their letter following their recent monitoring visit that 'Caseloads are too high across the whole service, but particularly for newly qualified social workers and for those in the assessment, safeguarding and planning teams. High caseloads are having a demonstrable impact on the quality of social work practice for children, the throughput of children's cases, the timescales of work completed, management oversight and the ability to embed learning from audits and training to social workers'. I have always maintained that social workers should not be brought in without a clear, evidenced and unequivocal need but it is necessary now to look at how capacity can be increased in order to improve practice and therefore outcomes for children.

### **Leadership and Management**

23. There has been changes in some senior line management responsibilities in Children's Services following our Chief Executive's restructuring of his leadership team. As well as the Director of Children's Services we now have two directors instead of three as the Director of Business, Performance and Change 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. This move is now being reviewed to assess if the appropriate matrix management arrangements and social work oversight are in place.

24. The Early Help service has moved from Education, Prevention and Partnership into Children's Care. This means that there is a continuous service offer running through the whole of Children's Care for our vulnerable children.
25. The interim Director of Children's Care, Catherine Parry, left the authority by mutual agreement at the beginning of July and Rachel Farnham, the then lead for transformation, stepped into the role on an interim basis. However, I am delighted to tell you that against external competition she has been appointed to the permanent role.
26. Ben Short, an interim manager experience in working in authorities in intervention has joined us as the Head of Safeguarding and Care Planning.
27. Stuart Williams, Head of Looked After Children and Corporate Parenting has left the authority and Paula Jemson, whose substantive post is that of Quality Assurance Manager is now acting up into the Head of Service position. She has a forensic approach to her work, a solid understanding of what good practice looks like and knows Middlesbrough well. We will advertise for the permanent role in the near future.
28. Our Principal Social Worker Suzy Kitching is still absent from work on an indefinite basis. Siobhan Davies, the service manager for the Independent Reviewing Service has had part of her week freed up to become the interim Principal Social Worker covering the most crucial aspects of the role.
29. I acknowledge the significance of these changes but there has been a need to build a strong leadership team with the skills Middlesbrough needs at this stage of our improvement journey. I am confident that the current team has the skills, knowledge and experience to make a difference for Middlesbrough's Children. This view is endorsed by our DfE link officer, Sam Morrison.
30. The recruitment and retention of social workers is a national problem and Middlesbrough is feeling the brunt of this at this point in time. Our agency worker costs are increasing although currently we cannot recruit sufficiently experienced and capable agency staff and our rolling adverts are not successful enough. A recruitment campaign is planned to go live as soon as possible. Research is underway to produce a comprehensive workforce strategy, matching demand and resources including caseloads to evidence whether or not we have our resources in the right place and to inform a wider recruitment campaign.

### **Governance and Partnerships**

31. Members have already been sent the letter outlining Ofsted's findings from their recent visit to Middlesbrough's Multi-Agency Children's Hub (MACH) and the Assessment Service. The letter notes that improvements have been made since the full inspection particularly
  - Social work practice in the MACH
  - The immediate response to 16-17 year old young people presenting as homeless
  - Performance monitoring

- Strategic oversight of services.

32. It is important to note that these improvements have been made from a very low base and there is much more to do. However, it is positive that no cases were referred back to us which happens when Ofsted feel that children are unsafe. Staff reported a more positive experience than during the full inspection with preparation sessions and a planned and coordinated response in the lead up to and during the monitoring visit.
33. There is a change to Ofsted's inspection programme and the next planned visit to Middlesbrough will be a Focussed Visit. This will take place any time between now and the end of March 2021, over three days with in-depth pre-inspection preparations. Three social care inspectors plus one education inspector will focus on decision making across the whole of Children's Services. After this visit Ofsted will decide if Middlesbrough should have another full inspection or remain on a programme of focussed visits.
34. In addition to the above we have our Annual Engagement Conversation with Ofsted on 11<sup>th</sup> December. During these meeting, which take place for all authorities, Ofsted will scrutinise specific areas of practice again across the whole of the service.
35. Our commissioner Peter Dwyer is with us from 9 – 11<sup>th</sup> November gathering information for his second report to the minister. The timetable includes meetings with groups of front line staff and interviews focusing on themes such as quality assurance. This visit will double as the DfE's own review of our progress. There is no doubt that we are practicing in an external spotlight.
36. Representatives from the Ministry for Communities, Housing and Local Government (MHCLG) visited us (virtually) in August to scrutinise our work to prevent homelessness amongst 16 - 17 year of young people. The feedback from the meeting outlined a number of strengths to build on along with the significant challenges we need to tackle on our improvement journey. However they stated that 'despite this creating all manner of challenges it is an exciting time and there is plenty of energy exuded by those championing the ambition. A working group has been formed to take forward the identified actions and the MHCLG will visit again in about 6 months' time.
37. An extraordinary meeting of the Children's Trust Board has been held 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 must now operate in the future.
38. 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. However the South Tees Safeguarding arrangement meetings have not yet 'settled' at the right level for example the strategic meeting is too operational and needs reviewing.
39. The Multi-Agency Strategic Improvement Board continues to meet on a monthly basis chaired by John Pearce an experienced DCS in Durham. The board receives

regular reports on the progress made against the improvement plans and 'spotlight' reports on significant issues such as demand.

40. I continue to have weekly conversations with our Department of Education link advisor Sam Morrison. These calls are both supportive and challenging for example most recently about the challenge of allocating work with children. Rob Brown and I also have a fortnightly 'REACT' phone calls with education link advisors and Sam Morrison set up to look at whole service issues. In addition Peter Dwyer will no longer be with us for the 2/3 days per month from November. The DfE are currently recruiting an Improvement Advisor to work with us instead but at the time of writing the appointment has not been made.

#### **What decision(s) are being asked for?**

41. That Executive approves
- The contents of this overview report.

#### **Why is this being recommended?**

42. It is important that the Executive has oversight of
- a) The improvement plan and the improvement work taking place to deliver improved outcomes for children
  - b) The external scrutiny of Children's Services in particular the additional scrutiny given because Middlesbrough's Children's Services are in intervention.
  - c) The context in which the service operates.

#### **Other potential decisions and why these have not been recommended**

43. None

#### **Impact(s) of recommended decision(s)**

##### ***Legal***

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

##### ***Financial***

45. See the body of the report

##### ***Policy Framework***

46. 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***

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



## **Risk**

48. 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)**

49. All in place

## **Appendices**

None

## **Background papers**

<b>Body</b>	<b>Report title</b>	<b>Date</b>
Commissioner for Children's Services	Report into Children's Services in Middlesbrough following inspection. Report for the Secretary of State for Education.	May 2020
MHCLG	Homeless Feedback	September 2020
Ofsted	Monitoring visit of Middlesbrough local authority children's services	16 <sup>th</sup> October 2020

**Contact:** Sue Butcher, Executive Director of Children's Services

**Email:** [sue\\_butcher@middlesbrough.gov.uk](mailto:sue_butcher@middlesbrough.gov.uk)