

## **Briefing to Members: Children's Services: 5<sup>th</sup> April 2020**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this briefing is to give members an overview of progress being made to improve services for Middlesbrough's children with particular reference to COVID 19.

The virus has inevitably affected the work being undertaken by staff across the whole of Children's Services but although we are working differently, for example, using video conferencing for meetings, progress has continued to be made against the Immediate Assurance Plan. In addition, rethinking the way we work has brought particular benefits which will in themselves improve practice going forward.

I am delighted to have become Middlesbrough's Director of Children's Services and have recruited Catherine Parry as the interim Director of Children's Care. Catherine, who has significant experience of improvement work took up her role on 2nd March.

### **Practice Scrutiny**

Our Department of Education (DfE) appointed Commissioner Peter Dwyer has continued with his programme throughout this period albeit remotely. He and our DfE representative Sam Morrison are clear that our improvement programme must continue to ensure that children in Middlesbrough are safe. This is indisputable but it has brought its own pressures. I have weekly calls with the Commissioner and fortnightly calls with Sam Morrison. In addition our Director for Education, Prevention and Partnerships, Rob Brown is having regular phone calls with our regional DfE Education representative Darren Radestock that will now join up with the conversations between me and Sam Morrison on a fortnightly basis.

One of the Commissioner's tasks was to take a view as to whether Middlesbrough should be able to retain its DfE funded 'No Wrong Door' project - working with colleagues from North Yorkshire to provide a responsive service to children on the edge of care. I am delighted to report that the Commissioner has recommended and it has been agreed, that Middlesbrough can keep working on this project. It will be of significant benefit to vulnerable adolescents who if they do come into our care often have very poor outcomes.

The Commissioner is now writing a report for the DfE setting out the options for the future of his involvement given the current circumstances. This is likely to include whether the timescale for his final report, currently due to be with the DfE on 27<sup>th</sup> May, should be extended.

Senior leaders are meeting our Ofsted Senior Regional Inspector on 23<sup>rd</sup> April to discuss our wider improvement plan as Ofsted will use it to assess our progress during their 3 monthly monitoring visits.

We are fortunate to have appointed, John Pearce as the Independent Chair of our Strategic Improvement Board. John is the Director of Children's Services in Durham and chair of the Regional Association of Directors of Children's Services and brings with him a wealth of experience of working in children's services.

As a result of working differently at the current time the next Strategic and Operational Improvement Boards are being brought together and will be held on 22<sup>nd</sup> April. The papers will include the most recent version of the wider improvement plan.

## **Planning**

The Immediate Assurance plan officially ended after 12 weeks on 31<sup>st</sup> March and we are now evaluating our progress against it and measuring outcomes for children. Some positive examples are

- **Early help and consistent approach to Thresholds at the Multi Agency Children's Hub (MACH).** Our audits and re-evaluation of thresholds evidence that at the front door children now receiving the right services at the right time
- **Caseloads for Personal Advisors** working with Care leavers have been reduced from over 30 to 22 young people. This gives them more time to support these vulnerable young people.
- **Homelessness.** We have undertaken training so that social workers understand that homeless young people have the right to become looked after.

One of the main vehicles for change is our programme of Clarity and Confidence Workshops run in conjunction with 'Strengthening Families' training. These workshops aim to provide clarity of practice and build social workers' confidence in working with children and their families. The subjects include safety planning and screening and decision making in the MACH. Feedback evidences that they have been well received by social care staff.

Although they have been progressed some aspects of the Immediate Assurance Plan are being rolled into the new wider improvement plan. As an example, the work on the threshold document needs to be completed on a Teeswide basis and although we have completed an addendum that meets Middlesbrough's immediate needs the threshold document itself needs to be revised and signed off by all four boroughs together.

The wider improvement plan has been widely consulted on and as mentioned above a worked up draft version has been submitted to Ofsted for comment.

## **Culture, Capacity and COVID**

Staff in Children's Services are still working to build the culture of High Support and High Challenge. We have brought in an additional team of auditors to review the work with children on child protection plans under the category of neglect as part of the Immediate

Assurance. The results of the audits are shared with staff. This can be challenging but knowing our practice is a necessary part of improvement.

The practice in Children's Services has inevitably been affected by the COVID virus, for example as of 3<sup>rd</sup> April there were 61 members of staff across the whole of the service self-isolating and therefore it has been necessary to look at our core business from a different perspective. Cllr High is an active attendee at the daily 'Gold' meetings where senior leaders take a strategic overview of the work of the council including how to support our vulnerable children. Most staff are working from home on an agile basis and are keeping in touch with families in the best way that they can – one example is 'socially distant' dog walking. We have also commissioned two managed social work teams starting in April to bring in additional capacity when and where it is needed. Every child with a social worker or an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) is deemed as vulnerable and an assessment has to be carried out to assess their safety. This means that 2,500 need to be completed. The Clarity and Confidence workshops on safety planning have supported this work and by the end of two weeks we completed over 900 assessments with a sample of them being audited to assess their quality. The different ways of working have brought positives to practice for example social care and education services have been working more closely together e.g. contributing to safety planning including whether vulnerable children should be in school. Staff have also been shared across services for example Early Help staff working in the assessment service. In this way we have made progress although it may not always be the progress we had expected to make against the Immediate Assurance Plan.

**Sue Butcher**  
**Director of Children's Services**  
**5<sup>th</sup> April 2020**