

<b>Report of:</b>	Councillor Mieka Smiles - Deputy Mayor and Executive Member for Children’s Services Sue Butcher - Executive Director of Children’s Services
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<b>Submitted to:</b>	Executive - 8 March 2022
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<b>Subject:</b>	Children’s Services Improvement Programme: Update Report
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**Summary**

<b>Proposed decision(s)</b>
That Executive notes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The progress made to improve outcomes for Middlesbrough’s vulnerable children as set out in our Children’s Services Improvement Plan 2020/2023.</li> <li>• The effect of this work on showing ‘Middlesbrough Children that they Matter’.</li> </ul>

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

<b>Contribution to delivery of the 2021-24 Strategic Plan</b>		
<b>People</b>	<b>Place</b>	<b>Business</b>
We will show Middlesbrough’s children that they matter and work to make our town safe and welcoming and to improve outcome’s for all children’.  Safeguarding and supporting those made vulnerable.		

<b>Ward(s) affected</b>
All Wards as improving services will positively affect vulnerable children across Middlesbrough.

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

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

1. To brief members of the Executive on the progress made against the Children's Service Improvement Plan with particular reference to the findings of Middlesbrough's Ofsted Monitoring Visit in December 2021.

## **Why does this report require a Member decision?**

2. This report is for noting only.

## **Report Background**

3. The Department of Education appointed a Commissioner, Peter Dwyer in March 2020 to assess Middlesbrough's potential to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and young people following a full inspection by Ofsted in January 2020. The Commissioner wrote his final report following his 'virtual' visit to Children's Services in June/July 2021. He stated that 'Considerable progress has been made and there is evidence of real impact most impressively in the face of significant demand and need, the LA has tackled legacy issues which had inflated the volume of cases in higher tiers of provision'. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families, Will Quince, subsequently agreed to withdraw Commissioner support on 22nd November 2021. This was a significant step for Middlesbrough although unfortunately delayed by a change in ministerial responsibilities. A meeting between colleagues from the Department for Education, executive members and senior officers explored the significant changes in the Council's Executive and the potential implications of a change of overall management structure. The DfE was assured that the new changes would help to stabilise the situation and that the Executive team were committed to the improvement journey. The DfE decided that because the changes were not yet embedded that Middlesbrough has now received a revised Statutory Direction. It has taken some time for the DfE to produce the Statutory Direction Notice and it is not due for publication until March 2022. Stuart Smith, Middlesbrough's Improvement Adviser, now has a focus on supporting members in their roles including the lead member for Children's Services, the chair of Children's Social Care Scrutiny, the Chair of the Corporate Parenting Board and the Chair of Education and Learning Scrutiny. In addition members most involved with the Children's Services including the lead member for children's services have undertaken training with the Local Government Association and a wider group of members are attending training on how to be a successful Corporate Parent.
4. At the same time, the Minister also agreed to award Middlesbrough a grant of £330k to support practice improvement. This funding is focused on bringing in additional practice expertise in areas identified for specific improvements such as children with disabilities. The Children's Services leadership team is concerned that this funding is only up until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022 and that without further funding there may not be enough time to secure sufficient traction on improvement. It is hoped that another bid can be made to secure funding from 1<sup>st</sup> April onwards.
5. Ofsted carried out a Monitoring Visit to Children's Services on 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> December 2021. The report, published on 31<sup>st</sup> January, is attached to this report. The visit focused on work with:
  - Children in Need
  - Children in Need of Protection

- The Public Law outline process – a formal process of work carried out to prevent work with children being escalated into court.

## **Strengths**

6. The inspectors found no child at risk of immediate harm or in need of urgent action. This is significant progress from the full inspection November/December 2019 (report published in Jan 2020)
7. The Senior Management Team know their services well and they have a realistic understanding of progress.
8. A detailed Self Evaluation document accurately describes improvements and areas for further development.
9. There is a successful focus on improving the capacity of staff, decreasing caseloads and employing more permanent, qualified and experienced staff.
10. Our audit programme, called Audit to Excellence is a particular strength. It gives a wide and in-depth coverage of the quality of the service with a robust moderation process.
11. There has been a successful focus on compliance for example we are carrying out the right work at the right time for example.
12. As well as the focus on compliance there has been an appropriate focus on improving the quality of practice through increased training and learning opportunities
13. There are some examples of good practice. The report says, 'for these children, there was good effective working relationships with the parents, good observations, meaningful direct work and well-focused planning and management oversight'
14. Stronger practice where there are immediate safeguarding concerns and children on the edge of care
15. It is extremely gratifying to note Ofsted's observations that Social Workers:
  - Know their children well and have an enthusiasm and passion for improving their lives.
  - Felt supported during lockdowns
  - Reported how Children's Services has been improving and that they are better supported to do their work.

## **Areas for Development**

16. There is still a stubborn 20% of inadequate practice although more recently this is showing some signs of improvement.
17. Plans and planning are not yet focused enough and lack timescales relevant to the child. This leads to delays in progressing children's plans so some children remain in situations where their needs are not met or sufficiently managed.
18. There is still an insufficient focus on the lived experience of the child

19. Social work tools such as the graded care profile used to support the identification of neglect are not sufficiently utilised to focus on patterns of behaviour and cumulative risk.
20. In the main, supervision is not sufficiently driving improvements and the management of decision making is too limited
21. Positive steps have been taken to improve pre-proceedings work but management oversight does not always lead to the identification of what needs to change for children.
22. There is evidence of a risk averse culture meaning that
  - Some families find themselves subject to statutory Child protection planning when in Ofsted's view it is not needed e.g. families who need support but work well with social workers and other agencies.
  - Safety plans can be in place when cases close when different support packages would be more effective.
23. Although there remains much to do Ofsted and the DfE are positive about Middlesbrough's practice improvement to date.

### **Next Steps**

24. To revise the improvement plan to reflect the areas for development highlighted in the report.
25. To have a determined focus on moving the quality of practice.
26. There will be at least two more monitoring visits the first of which is in March 2022 followed by one in June 2022. The March visit will focus on court work, permanence which was a significant factor in receiving our inadequate grading in January 2020 and looked after children.
27. In the autumn Ofsted will consult with us as to our readiness for a full inspection or whether there should be another monitoring visit with a full inspection likely to be at the end of 2022 or early 2023. Although moving out of intervention as soon as possible seems positive the view of the leadership team is that by waiting a further few months we could gain a higher Ofsted grading which will stand the authority in good stead going forward.
28. The Multi-Agency Improvement Board continues to meet on a six weekly basis and will continue to do so at least up until the full inspection. In addition to holding Children's Services to account for our own progress a major focus for the Board going forward has to be on continuing to develop strong working relationships with our partner agencies. A board development session focusing on systems leadership across all agencies working with and for children as one system is planned for April/May 2022.

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

That Executive notes:

29. The progress made to improve outcomes for Middlesbrough's vulnerable children as set out in our Children's Services Improvement Plan 2020/2023.

30. The effect of this work on showing 'Middlesbrough Children that they Matter'.

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

31. To ensure that Members are fully briefed this report has not been considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Board or by a Scrutiny Panel.

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

32. Executive could chose not to formally note the report but this would mean that the improvements to services for Middlesbrough's most vulnerable children are not formally recognised.

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

#### **Legal**

33. The work being carried out within the improvement plan contributes to the Council meeting its statutory duties in regards to safeguarding children in Middlesbrough.

#### **Financial**

34. Children's Services have been awarded the grant, paid in arrears on actual expenditure, of £330,120 from the DfE Children's Services Improvement and Intervention Unit (CSIIU) to support the Improvement journey in Middlesbrough.

35. The Council will look to bid for further funding opportunities beyond 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022.

36. This initial short term funding has allowed an increase in capacity in Practice Improvement, Vulnerable adolescents, Children with Disabilities, participation of young people as well as improving data and evaluation of services.

37. The funding has to be spent by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022, and is only based on relevant actual expenditure.

38. There are no effects on the Councils revenue position from the grant in this current financial year 2021-22.

39. The council have provided approximately £1.6m per annum during the last two financial years for Improvement.

40. The Children's Services financial position is detailed in the latest Quarter 3 report to Executive.

#### **Policy Framework**

41. The contents of this report do not impact on the Council's policy framework.

#### **Equality and Diversity**

42. The improvement of children's services should not result in policies and practices that impact inequitably on individual or groups because they hold one or more protected characteristics.

43. Ensuring that services to children and families are effective and appropriate for all including those who hold one or more protected characteristics is a key responsibility for the service and will be monitored at all times as part of the improvement journey.

### **Risk**

44. Inadequate safeguarding practices lead to children and young people being at risk of significant harm resulting in organisational reputational damage. Risks are reported to the Multi-Agency Strategic Improvement Board which takes place on a six weekly basis.

### **Actions to be taken to implement the decision(s)**

45. The report is for noting only.

### **Appendices**

46. None

### **Background papers (attached)**

<b>Body</b>	<b>Report title</b>	<b>47. Date</b>
Department of Education	Commissioner's 12 month Review Report	July 2021
Department of Education	Letter from Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State	22 <sup>nd</sup> November 2021
Ofsted	Monitoring Visit Letter	31 <sup>st</sup> Jan 2022

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