

# MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL

**DRAFT FINAL REPORT  
CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE'S SOCIAL CARE &  
SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL  
26 APRIL 2022  
SUFFICIENCY & PERMANENCY (PERCEPTIONS OF  
CHILDREN IN CARE)**

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## AIM OF THE INVESTIGATION

1. Children's Services in Middlesbrough has faced considerable challenges in recent times, more generally attributed to the numbers of children, young people and families requiring intervention. These challenges and pressures intensified following the Ofsted inspection of November and December 2019 and the Covid Pandemic.
2. Given such challenging circumstances the Panel was keen to examine placement availability, local sufficiency, permanency outcomes and how perceptions of children in care can be improved.

## COUNCIL'S/MAYOR'S PRIORITIES

3. The scrutiny of this topic fits within the following priorities of the Council and Mayor:-
  - People – Children and Young People: "We will show Middlesbrough children that they matter and work to make our town safe and welcoming and to improve outcomes for all children and young people."
  - People – Vulnerability: "We will work to address the causes of vulnerability and inequalities in Middlesbrough and safeguard and support those made vulnerable."

## COUNCIL'S THREE CORE AIMS

4. The scrutiny of this topic aligns with the Council's three core aims as detailed in the Strategic Plan 2020-2024<sup>1</sup>:-
  - People – "Working with communities and other public services to improve the lives of our residents".
  - Place – "Securing improvements in Middlesbrough's housing, infrastructure and attractiveness, improving the town's reputation, creating opportunities for local people and improving our finances".
  - Business – "Promoting investment in Middlesbrough's economy and making sure we work as effectively as possible to support our ambitions for People and Place".

## TERMS OF REFERENCE

5. The terms of reference for the Scrutiny Panel's investigation were as follows:-
  - a) **Children Looked After:-**
    - i) To examine and compare the profile of Middlesbrough's Children Looked After population against national and statistical neighbours.
    - ii) To examine placement types and performance.
  - b) **Foster Care:-**
    - i) To establish a profile of Middlesbrough's foster carers, including current recruitment and retention initiatives.
    - ii) To examine the availability of placements for Children Looked After in Middlesbrough.

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<sup>1</sup> Middlesbrough Council's Strategic Plan 2020-24

- c) **Permanency:-**
  - i) To investigate the issues around permanency, including adoption, and
  - ii) To examine any initiatives and areas of best practice.
- d) **Perception:-**
  - i) To challenge people's perceptions of children in care.
  - ii) To create a better understanding of Children Looked After for everyone involved in the process.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 6. It is worth noting that the Scrutiny Panel's review took place over the course of the full Municipal Year 2020-21. Data within Children's Services is constantly changing but the information provided within the report was correct at the time it was provided. Whilst it is acknowledged that data has evolved since it was received by the Panel, the themes of the review remain the same.
- 7. Children and young people are taken into the care of the Local Authority when it is unsafe for them to remain in the family home or because their parents are unable to look after them due to a variety of reasons.
- 8. Statutory Guidance, "Working Together to Safeguard Children"<sup>2</sup> sets out the core legal requirements for Local Authorities and partner agencies and what they must do to keep children safe. The Statutory Framework<sup>3</sup> sets out the legislation relevant to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children. This includes:-
  - The Children Act 2004
  - The Children Act 1989
  - The Children and Social Work Act 2017
  - Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011
  - Childcare Act 2006
  - Crime and Disorder Act 1998
  - Housing Act 1996
- 9. In addition, the Children and Social Work Act 2017 states that when a child or young person comes into care, the local authority becomes their 'corporate parent'. In short, this means that the local authority should:-
  - act in the best interests of the child - promoting health and wellbeing
  - encourage them to express their views and feelings and try to secure the best possible outcomes
  - ensure they have access to services
  - ensure they are safe, have stable homes, relationships and are in education/work
  - prepare them for adulthood and independent living.

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<sup>2</sup> HM Government - Working Together to Safeguard Children (A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children) July 2018, updated December 2020.

<sup>3</sup> HM Government – Working Together to Safeguard Children (Statutory Framework – legislation relevant to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children) July 2018.

10. As Corporate Parents, all Councillors have a responsibility to ensure that the Council is meeting these duties towards all children in its care and care leavers.
11. Throughout this report, a number of terms are used to describe the different types of care provided to children. Here is a summary of what the terms mean:-
- **Children Looked After** – A child is ‘looked after’ by a local authority if they are provided with accommodation for a continuous period of more than 24 hours; are subject to a care order or are subject to a placement order.
  - **Child in Need** - Defined under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 as ‘a child who is unlikely to reach or maintain a satisfactory level of health or development, or their health or development will be significantly impaired without the provision of children’s social care services, or the child is disabled’.
  - **Child Protection Plan** – A child becomes the subject of a child protection plan if they are assessed as being at risk of harm at an initial child protection conference. (Their plan should be reviewed within the first 3 months and then at intervals of not more than 6 months).
  - **Adoption** - The legal process of a child becoming a permanent member of a new family. Once an adoption order has been made, the child is no longer legally related to their birth family and parental responsibility passes to the adopter. This can only happen if a court orders it.
  - **Care Order** - An order granted by a court under section 31 of the Children Act 1989, placing a child in the care of a local authority. This requires the local authority to provide accommodation for the child, to maintain and safeguard them, to promote their welfare and to act in accordance with the other welfare responsibilities set out in the Children Act 1989. It gives the local authority parental responsibility for the child.
  - **Special Guardianship Order** - An order appointing one or more individuals to be a child’s ‘special guardian’. It is a private law order made under the Children Act 1989 and is intended for those children who cannot live with their birth parents and who would benefit from a legally secure placement.
  - **Supervision Order** - An order granted under section 31 of the Children Act 1989 placing the child under the supervision of a local authority. Under the order, the local authority must advise, assist and befriend the child. A supervision order can be made for a period of up to a year. This can be extended for any period not exceeding 3 years in total from the date of the first order.

#### Independent Review of Children’s Social Care

12. During the course of the Scrutiny Panel’s review, an Independent Review of Children’s Social Care was launched, led by Josh MacAlister.
13. The Panel heard that the over-arching question the review aimed to cover was “How can we ensure that children grow up in loving, safe and stable families and, where that is not possible, that care provides the same foundations?” Details on the scope of the review were provided, together with details of the themes and questions being addressed within the review. Panel Members were also

informed of the ways in which they could contribute to the Calls for Advice and Calls for Evidence as part of the Review.

14. The Independent Review published its 'Case for Change' in June 2021 The Case for Change. The review document is a summary of the key issues in children's social care as it currently stands. Its key headings are:-
  - (a) we need to do more to help families;
  - (b) we need more effective support and decisive action that keeps children safe;
  - (c) the care system must build, not break, relationships; and
  - (d) change will not happen without addressing system causes.
15. Further feedback was sought in relation to the case for change and a summary of the responses was produced in October 2021 covering the main themes of the responses received.
16. Engagement events and consultation are continuing prior to the publication of the final report, which is expected to be published in 2022.

## **SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE GATHERED DURING THE REVIEW**

### **TERM OF REFERENCE A – CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER**

- a) **To examine and compare the profile of Middlesbrough's Children Looked After population against national and statistical neighbours**

#### **The National Picture - Latest Headline Information – 2019-2020<sup>4</sup>**

17. The latest figures available from the Department for Education Statistics for Children Looked After in England spanned the period 31 March 2019 to 31 March 2020. As at 31 March 2020 the **number of children looked after** in England was **80,080** – this figure has increased by 2% on the previous year (year ending 31 March 2019). In total **30,970** children started being looked after in the year ending 31 March 2020 – down 3% on the previous year and **29,590** children ceased to be looked after in the year ending 31 March 2020 – similar to the previous year. The number of children who ceased to be looked after because they were adopted was **3,440** at year ending 31 March 2020. This was down 4% on the previous year. The rate per 10,000 children, aged 18 and under, who were looked after as at 31 March 2020 was **67**. This has increased from **65 per 10,000** the previous year.
18. The figures in England as at 31 March 2020 also show:-
- Almost half of children in care were aged 10-18 years old.
  - Around one-third of children coming into the care system were aged four or under.
  - Three in four children in care lived with foster carers.
  - One in ten children in foster care had three or more placements in a year.
  - Every year, approximately 12,500 young people leave care, aged 16 or above, to move into independence or semi-independence.

#### **A Profile of Middlesbrough's Children Looked After Population**

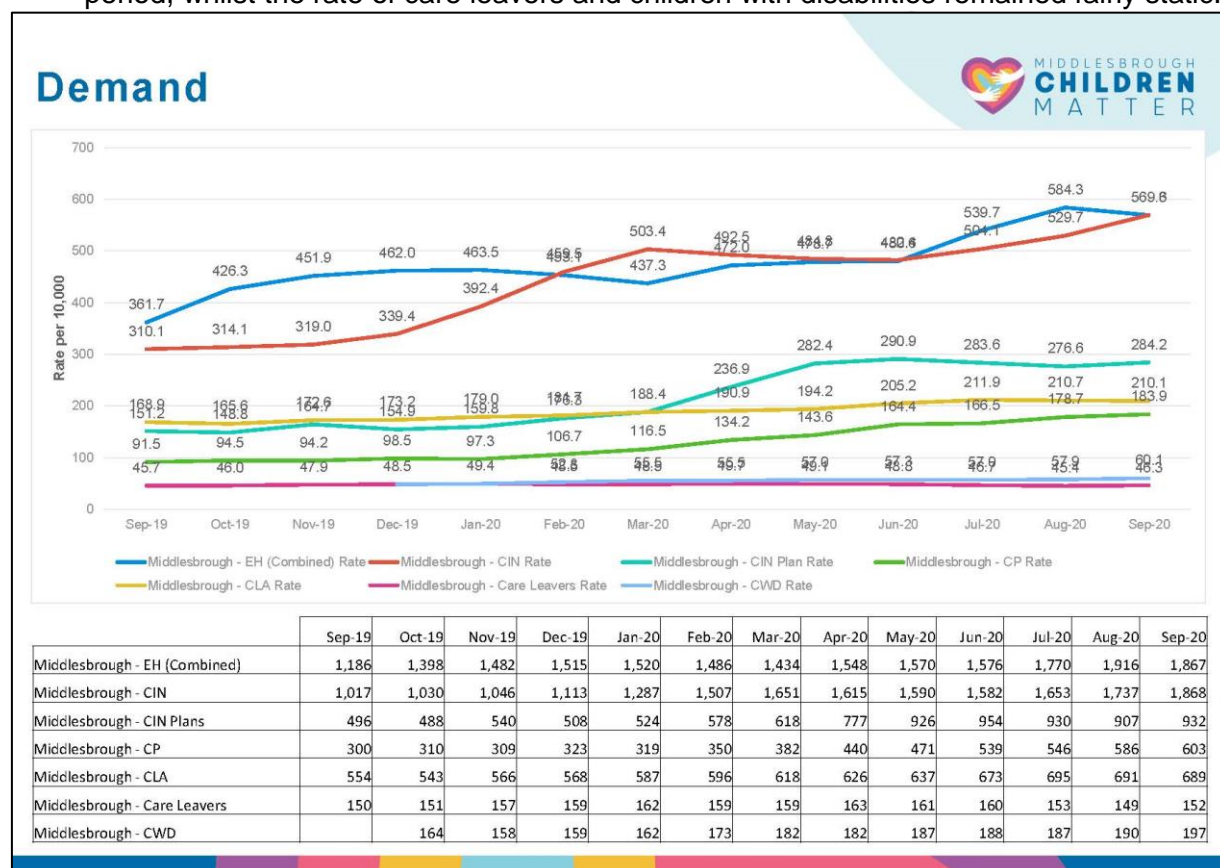
19. The following information was provided in October 2020, as part of the Panel's evidence gathering during the review.
20. In October 2020, Middlesbrough had **689** children looked after – equating to **210.1 per 10,000** population - which is the highest rate in the North East and the second highest rate nationally.
21. A breakdown of the numbers of children in Middlesbrough known to Children's Services, by category, as at September/October 2020 is provided below:-

	September 2019	September 2020	% Change
Early Help (Combined)	1,186	<b>1,867</b>	↑ <b>57%</b>
Children in Need (CiN)	1,017	<b>1,868</b>	↑ <b>84%</b>
CiN Plans	496	<b>932</b>	↑ <b>88%</b>
Child Protection	300	<b>603</b>	↑ <b>101%</b>
Children Looked After	554	<b>689</b>	↑ <b>24%</b>
Care Leavers	150	<b>152</b>	↑ <b>1%</b>

<sup>4</sup> DfE Statistics for Children Looked After in England year end 31 March 2020.

Children with Disabilities	* 164 (* October 2019)	<b>197</b>	<b>↑ 20%</b>
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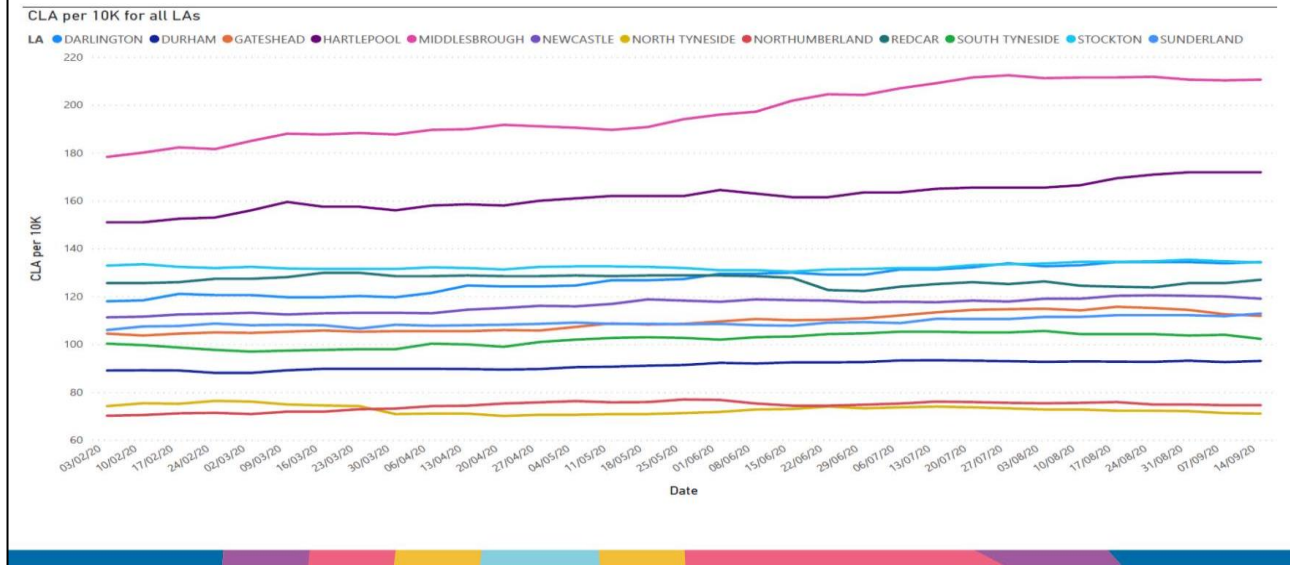
22. The graphic below illustrates the rates of children per 10,000 in Middlesbrough, who received various social care interventions between **September 2019 and September 2020**.
23. It shows that Early Help and Child in Need interventions had the highest rates per 10,000 and that rates of **Children Looked After** had **risen from 168.9 to 210.1 per 10,000** during the one year period, whilst the rate of care leavers and children with disabilities remained fairly static.



24. When compared with **regional statistical neighbours**, as at September 2020, Middlesbrough had:-
- the **highest** rate of children looked after (aged under 18) per 10,000;
  - the **highest** rate of looked after children in the previous quarter;
  - the **highest** rate of children (per 10,000) ceasing to be looked after;
  - and the **lowest** rate of children looked after that moved to adoption.
25. The graphic below shows the numbers, per 10,000, of children looked after by each of the north east local authorities. Between 3 February and 14 September 2020, Middlesbrough had the highest rates.



## Demand (4)



26. A regional comparison between the 12 north east local authorities of the rates of children looked after as at week commencing 16 March 2020 (start of the first lockdown) and the week commencing 5 October 2020 showed that only North Tyneside and Redcar and Cleveland had noted reductions in the number of children becoming looked after, per 10,000 population (14 and 8 children respectively). Whilst all authorities experienced an increase, Middlesbrough experienced the highest increase of 75 children.

### Who are the children in Middlesbrough's care?

27. A profile of the 689 children classified as being looked after in Middlesbrough (as at October 2020), is set out below:-

Middlesbrough has 689 CLA (Oct 2020). This is a rate of 210.1 per 10,000 - the highest rate in the North East and the second highest rate nationally.

#### Age

The current ages of our CLA are:-

- 5.6% are aged under 1 year
- 21.4% are aged 1-4 years
- 23% are aged 5 to 9 years
- 35.4% are aged 10-15 years
- 14.5% are aged 16 years and over.
- 20 young people (3%) in care started their care episodes when they were 16 +
- 55 (8%) children in care over 10 years were brought into care when they were 5 years old or younger.
- 15.1% of children who become looked after are new-born, i.e. aged 0-1. (Greater than national trends).

#### Ethnicity

- 84.9 % of current CLA are White. This is an **over representation** against the school population at 78%.
- 6.1 % are mixed ethnicity in line with the school population (6%)
- 2.3 % are Asian. This is an **under representation** against the school population of 11%.
- 5.0 % are Black. This is an **over representation** against the school population of 2%.
- 0.9% are 'Other'. This is an **under representation** from the school population of 4%.

#### Geography

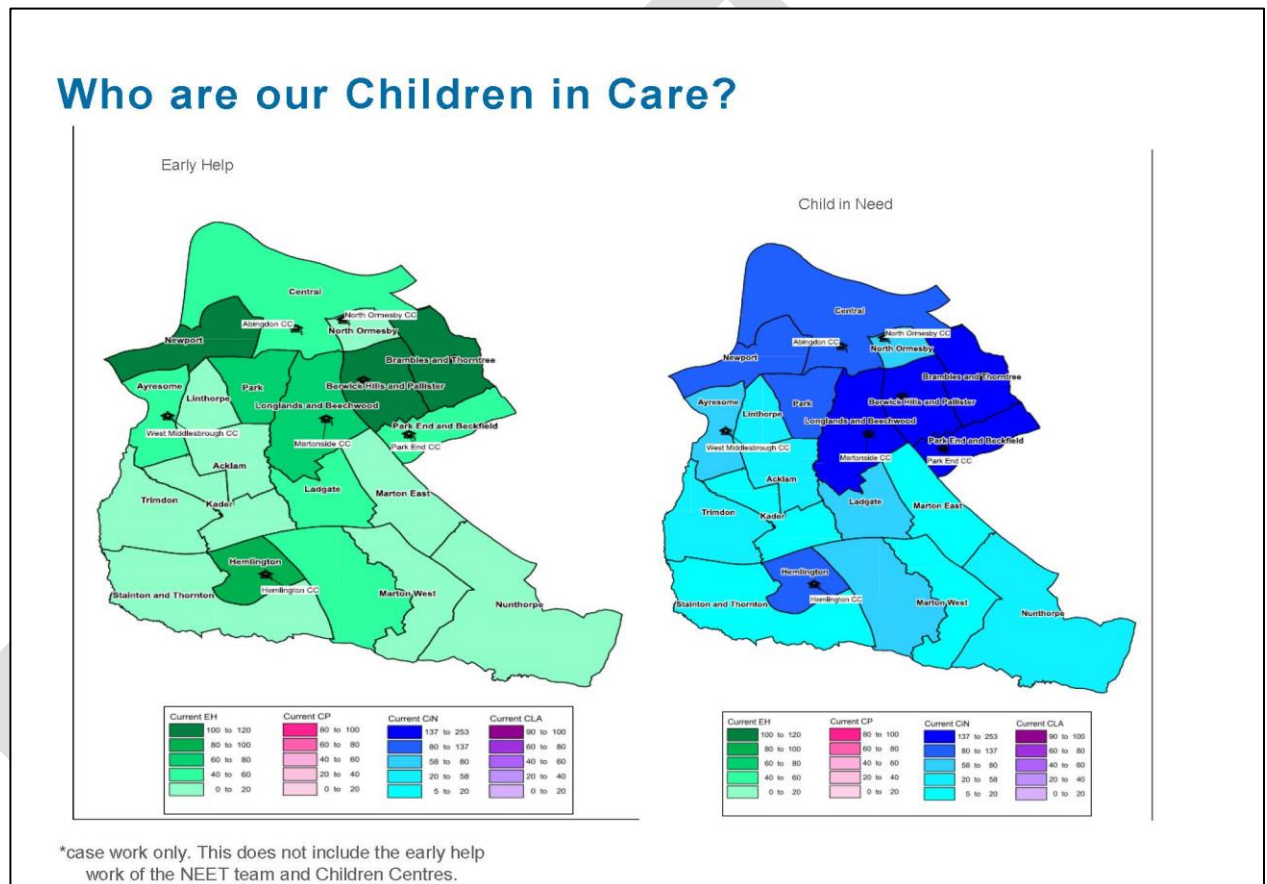
We have greater numbers of CLA from some of our wards. Although deprivation is a key factor in understanding our demand the way we work and safeguard in certain communities could also be a driver in understanding demand.

1 in 15 children are CLA in North Ormesby. Proportionately we do not work with families at a Child Protection threshold to the same level. Similar for Newport.

-North Ormesby: 3.9 children CLA for every child on a CP Plan.

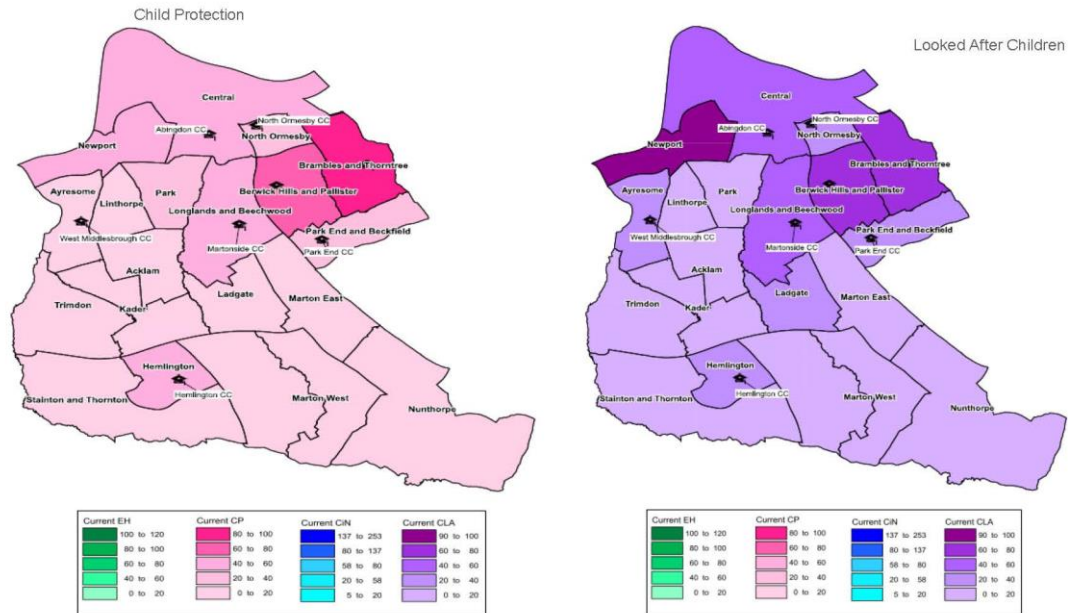
-Brambles and Thorntree 1.3 children CLA for every child on a CP Plan.

28. Between October 2019 and October 2020, 59 unborn children were the subject of Child Protection plans, all of whom went on to become looked after during the same period (between the ages 0-1 year).
29. Between April and October 2020, 27 out of 28 unborn children who were the subject of Child Protection Plans went on to become looked after started being looked after within the same six-month period, aged 0-1 year.
30. This initial data requires further analysis work but shows a significant proportion of children subject to pre-birth Child Protection Plans go on to become looked after between birth and one year. Around 20% of the children looked after cohort are aged one year and under. This figure appears **high** compared to regional and statistical comparators.



31. The maps above show a high level of need in Brambles and Thortree as well as Berwick Hills and Pallister Wards. The nature of that need focusses around Early Help and Child in Need activity rather than Children Looked After activity.

## Who are our children in care?



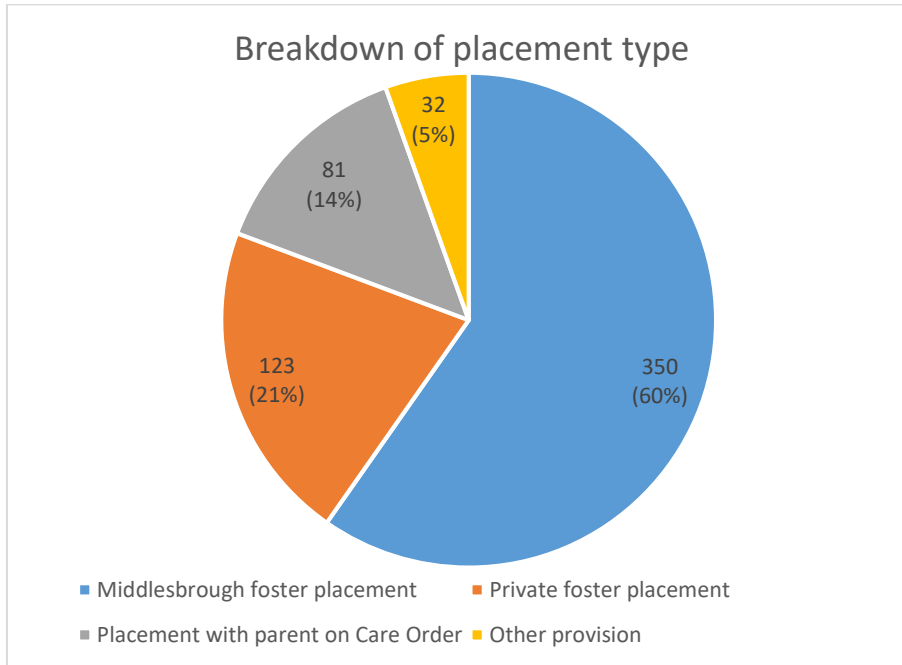
\*postcodes for CLA are of home postcodes and NOT of placements postcodes.

32. The area with highest Children Looked After interventions is Newport Ward which, conversely, is ranked fifth highest for Child Protection and Child in Need interventions.
31. Interestingly the maps show a gap in Child Protection provision in the more ethnically diverse Wards.
32. The Panel heard that of all Wards in Middlesbrough, North Ormesby - the most deprived Ward in Middlesbrough - has the greatest proportion of social work intervention per head of population for children. Indeed, around one in 17 children is Looked After.
33. Despite this, the local authority is doing comparatively little Early Help case work in North Ormesby. Identifying why this is the case requires further analysis, but it has been hypothesised that families arriving in North Ormesby are already at crisis point – with their level of need being too great for Early Help interventions.

## **TERM OF REFERENCE A - Children Looked After**

### **b) Examine placement type and performance**

34. As at October 2020, of the 689 children looked after in Middlesbrough, 505 were placed in foster placements and 81 lived at home with parents on a Full or Interim Care Order.

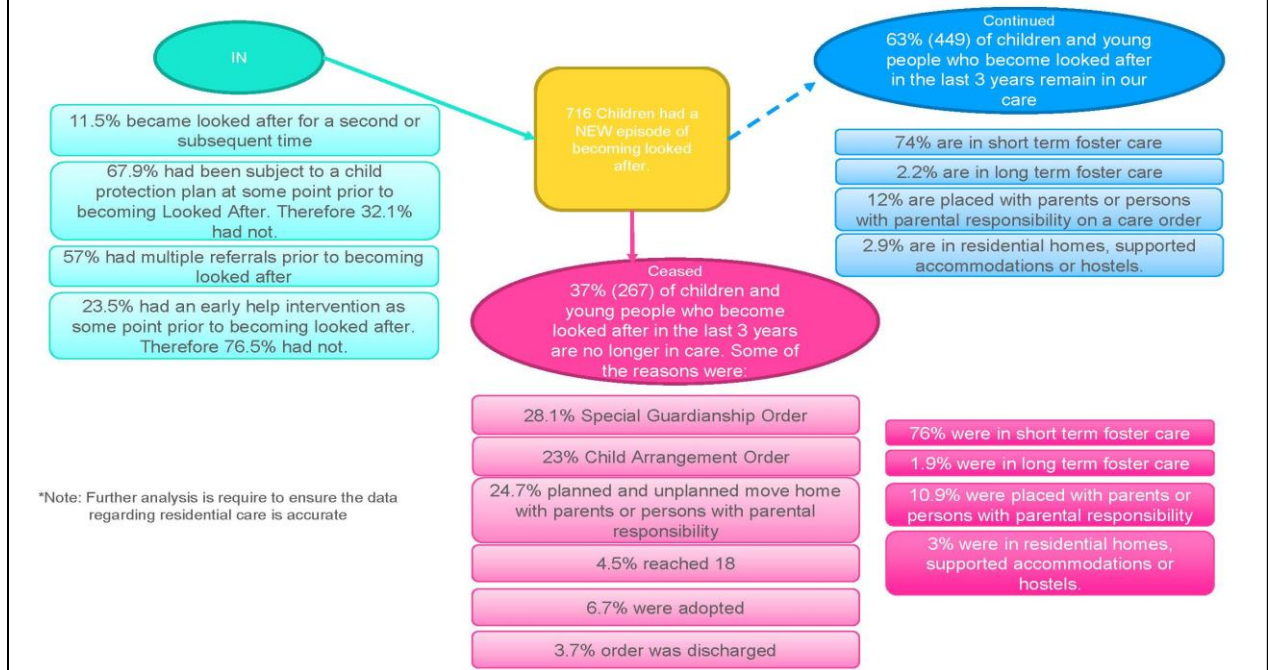


35. Those children living with parents on a Full Care Order are visited in the same way as a child subject to a Child Protection Plan, with oversight by the Court. Those subject to an Interim Care Order are kept under regular review and monitoring by the Court whilst the appropriate support and interventions are provided by Children's Services.
36. The graphic below aims to provide some understanding of the journey of 716 Middlesbrough children and young people who had a new episode of becoming looked after, and their individual outcomes, over a three-year period from April 2017 to June 2020.



## Placements and planning

**What is the journey of children and young people to care and where do they go?**  
*An analysis spanning 3 years of children who became looked after*

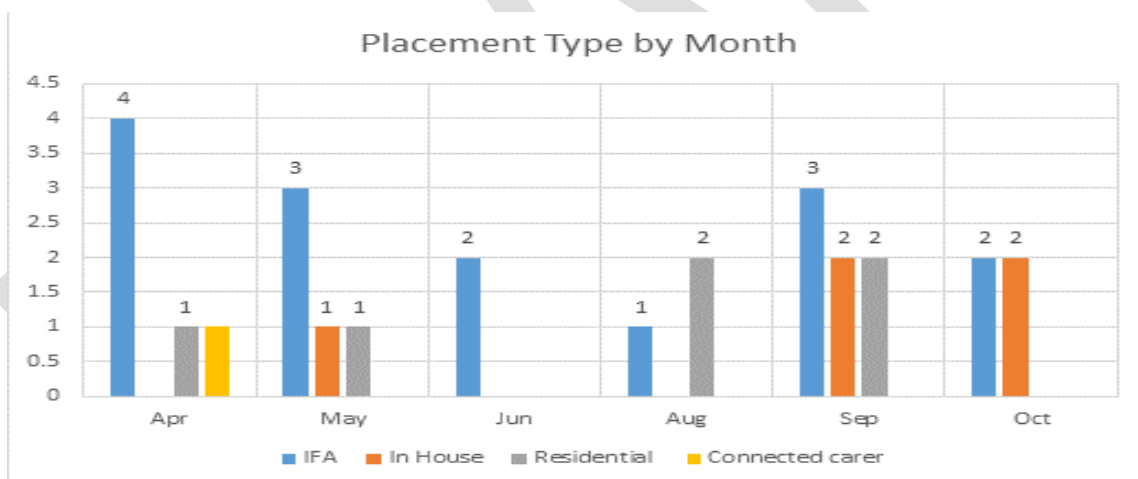


37. The Panel heard that in the six-month period up to October 2020, 70 children had ceased to be looked after. 41 of the 70 children were aged five and over, and six children achieved permanency through adoption.
38. Middlesbrough has improved performance in achieving permanence through adoption over the last five years, although the figure has reduced slightly over the last six month period.
39. During 2017-18 and 2018-19, Middlesbrough was similar to the England national average for adoption and also to statistical neighbours.
40. Further information in relation to adoption can be found at paragraph 67 of the report.

### Placement Stability & Breakdowns

41. In terms of placement type and provision, data provided in November 2020 showed that 73% of Children Looked After in Middlesbrough lived in a foster placement, this included connected persons (kinship care) placements. This had increased from 69% the previous year (2018-19) and compared with 72% nationally and 71% with statistical neighbours.
42. There were 343 placements (52%) with in-house foster carers. This had increased from 42% the previous year (2018-19) and compared with 50% nationally and 59% with statistical neighbours. There were 125 private placements.
43. The Panel also heard that whilst recently published data showed 51% of Middlesbrough children were placed outside of the town, as at October 2020, 82% were placed within 20 miles of Middlesbrough with 18% being placed more than 20 miles away.

44. Placement stability is higher than the national average and statistical neighbours, with 64% (123) of children that had been looked after for two and a half years or more remaining in the same placement for two or more years. Although placements moves are sometimes due to a placement breaking down, there are also positive reasons for a move - such as a child being moved to an adoptive placement.
45. During the period October 2019 to October 2020:-
- 469 of Middlesbrough's Children Looked After were in their first and only placement
  - 147 children had experienced two placement moves
  - 49 had three placements
  - seven children had four placements
  - eight children had five placements
  - three children had six placements; and
  - no children had seven or more.
46. The graph below shows the numbers of placements, and placement type, that broke down during the period April to October 2020. In October, two in-house foster placements had broken down and two independent (external) foster placements had broken down. There was one connected persons placement breakdown during this six-month period.



47. Work to prevent placement breakdowns and improve placement stability included focussing on the support offer to fragile placements, the introduction of a placement disruption procedure, analysing data to understand the reasons why placements had ended, the LCS transformation to support improved performance reporting and social work practice, collaboration with Futures for Families, Innovate Teams and the implementation of the Corporate Parenting Strategy.

## **TERM OF REFERENCE B – Foster Care**

**a) To establish a profile of Middlesbrough’s foster carers, including current recruitment and retention initiatives**

**b) to examine the availability of placements for Children Looked After in Middlesbrough.**

48. All Local Authority Fostering Services and Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) are required to provide an annual dataset to Ofsted in relation to the numbers of approved foster carers and placements it has and also data relating to the types of foster care, registrations, de-registrations and a range of other subjects.
49. Government statistics<sup>5</sup> for the period 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020, shows that IFAs have seen a net increase in capacity due to an additional **330** fostering households, creating **560** placements. In contrast, Local Authorities have seen a slight decrease in capacity with an additional **230** fostering households and **490** places.
50. Other key headlines in the national statistics for fostering in England 2019/20 are as follows (as at 31 March 2020):-
- It is estimated that there has been a 3% increase in the number of filled fostering places and a 13% decrease in the number of vacant places.
  - Of the total 71,150 approved foster carers, 65% were aged over 50 – with 25% being aged over 60.
  - Carers aged 20–39 had 67% of available places with children in them, whilst carers aged 55 and over had 62%. It would, therefore, appear that the older the carer, it was more likely that there would be a greater proportion of ‘not available’ places.
  - There were 14,995 fostering households registered within the IFA sector. Around half of these (7,652) are registered with IFAs that are owned by the six largest providers of IFA places in England. Therefore, the top six providers account for 51% of all IFA households, and 18% of fostering households nationally.
51. In 2019/20, the annual data return for Middlesbrough showed it had **141** approved foster carers offering **267** placements. By autumn 2020, the number of approved Foster Carers increased to **156**, however, the number of available placements decreased to **263**.
52. Whilst this indicates a net increase in approved foster carers, there is no increase in the number of placements available. Therefore, it is crucial to utilise placements as effectively as possible, with careful matching of children to placements.
53. The 156 approved foster carers are broken down into the following approval categories:-
- 89 - short term foster carers
  - 38 – fully approved connected persons carers
  - 17 - long term foster carers
  - 11 – respite care
  - 1 – fostering to adopt

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<sup>5</sup> Government Statistics - Fostering in England 2019/20 (main findings)

54. During 2019/20, a total of 41 new foster carers were approved in Middlesbrough. By September 2020, a further 22 new foster carers were approved. This supports the information regarding good conversion rates in Middlesbrough from the point of initial enquiry to approval.
55. In 2019/20, a total of 24 foster carers were de-registered (16 mainstream and 8 fully approved connected persons). This means that an approved foster carer resigned. Reasons for this included retirement, ill health, and other work commitments. By September 2020, a total of six foster carers were de-registered (two mainstream and four connected persons).
56. It is noted that during 2020 and January 2021, just one approved foster carer had been de-registered in order to take up fostering with an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA), however, during the same period, four IFA foster carers had deregistered with their IFA and were subsequently approved as Middlesbrough foster carers, citing the main reason for doing so as improved practice in Middlesbrough.
57. In 2019/20, **163** children were placed with in-house Middlesbrough foster carers. By September 2020, this number increased to **174**. This indicates that initiatives such as Innovate, bringing children from external placements back to Middlesbrough, and fostering recruitment drives were beginning to work.
58. As of September 2020, there was a total of 56 places not available for use. The figure was comparable with figures for 2019/20. Reasons for unavailable placements included: foster carers taking a break from fostering (such as ill health/personal reasons); needs of another child currently in placement; placement only available to sibling groups.
59. By January 2021, the number of 'on hold' foster carers increased to 22. This equated to 41 children not being able to be placed with in-house foster carers.
60. The Panel heard that 'on hold' carers are offered support back into fostering if they wish to continue and the support offer includes improved training and development, regular monthly consultation meetings and a foster carers Facebook page.
61. Feedback from foster carers leaving Middlesbrough's fostering service is sought via a Satisfaction Survey, although the Service acknowledges that further development of the survey is required.

#### Recruitment and Retention

62. During 2019/20, Middlesbrough received 123 initial enquiries in relation to fostering. This figure significantly reduced to 48 enquiries between April 2020 and January 2021. The reason for the reduction is understood to be predominantly due to Covid, however, Middlesbrough received a steady rate of enquiries regarding fostering that was comparable to most IFAs. The conversion rate from initial enquiry to the stage two assessment process is generally around 20% in Middlesbrough which is comparable or higher than other local authorities.
63. Of those 48 initial enquiries: 14 households (29%) were not progressed as the enquirer/applicant was deemed unsuitable by the Fostering Service; 20 (46%) households did not progress further due to enquirer/applicant's own choice and 14 (29%) households were open to the recruitment team.



64. The Fostering Service acknowledges that IFAs are at the forefront of recruitment strategies and is trying to utilise tried and tested practices such as the use of Google ads, various social media platforms and word of mouth to attract people to fostering in Middlesbrough.
65. In relation to gaps in Middlesbrough's fostering provision, the Panel heard that several areas had been identified, including: Parent and child placements; Sibling group placements and Teenage (11 plus) placements.
66. A recruitment campaign was set to go live in early 2021 which would attempt to appeal to potential carers who may be able to fill those gaps. In addition, a team of Independent Social Workers has been recruited in order to specifically complete Form F assessments of foster carer applicants that would hopefully be generated by the campaign.

## TERM OF REFERENCE C– PERMANENCY

### **a) To investigate the issues around permanency, including adoption.**

67. Permanence is defined in the statutory guidance that accompanies the Children's Act 1989 as providing children with *"a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging ... with a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond."*<sup>6</sup>
68. Permanency for children can be achieved in a number of ways:-
- **Long Term Fostering** – Where a child is placed permanently with foster carers. The child is subject to a Care Order. Birth parents retain parental responsibility together with the local authority, however, the local authority's parental responsibility carries greater weight than that of the birth parents. Foster carers do not have parental responsibility.
  - **Adoption** – A Court Order. Parental responsibility is removed from the birth parents and transferred to the adoptive parents.
  - **Special Guardianship Order** – A Court Order. Birth parents share parental responsibility with the special guardian and the special guardian's parental responsibility carries greater weight than that of the birth parents.
  - **Child Arrangement Order** – An Order stating where, and with whom, a child will live, who they will spend time with and who they will have contact with. The decisions are made in the best interests of each child on an individual basis.
  - **Long Term Residential** – Where a young person is placed permanently in a children's residential home. The young person may be subject to a Care Order (or a 'Section 20' agreement), where the birth parents have parental responsibility but the local authority does not.
  - **Return/Remain at Home** – When a child or young person returns home where it is safe to do so, or is able to remain at home with birth parents.
69. Ofsted's report<sup>7</sup> following its inspection of Middlesbrough's Children's Services in November/December 2019 stated:-
- *'Early permanence is not prioritised for children in Middlesbrough and there is a lack of parallel planning which creates delay in achieving stability'. (Para 15).*
  - *'The lack of parallel planning creates delay for most children in achieving permanence'. (Para 14).*
  - *'Delays in achieving permanence are not sufficiently challenged by Independent Reviewing Officers' (Para 19).*
  - *'Some children, including very young children, have experienced too many changes in placement before their permanent placement is identified. (Para 23).*
  - *'Children experience significant delay in securing permanence through adoption. Currently there are not enough adopters for children who are waiting' (Para 25).*

### Sufficiency of Placements

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<sup>6</sup> The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations: Vol. 2 – June 2015 - DfE

<sup>7</sup> Ofsted Inspection on Middlesbrough Children's Social Care Services 25/11/19 – 06/12/19 (published 24/01/20)

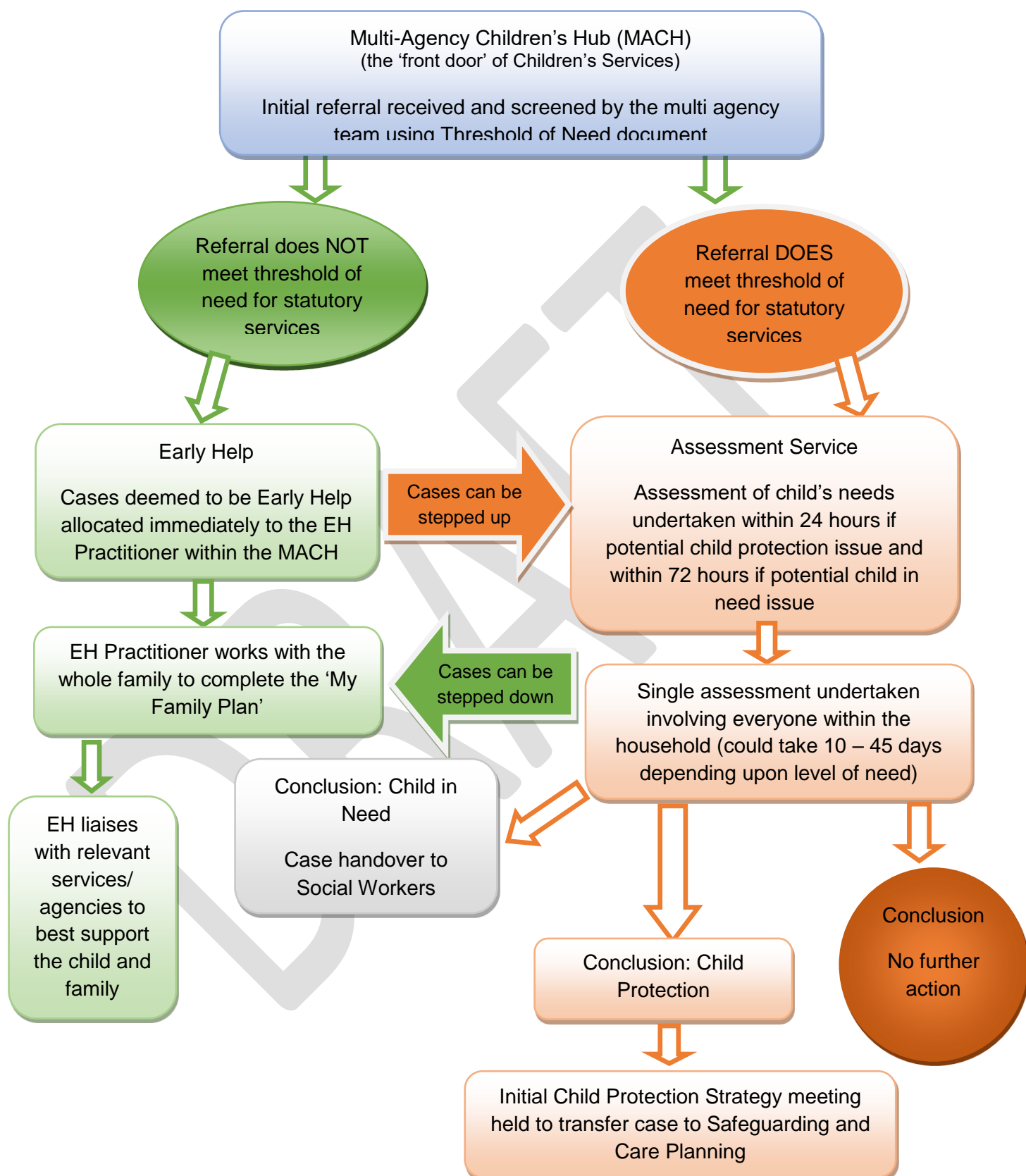
70. The issue relating to placement sufficiency is whether or not Middlesbrough has enough placements, or access to enough placements, to meet the individual needs of the children and young people in Middlesbrough's care and if not what is being done to meet their needs.
71. The definition of 'sufficiency' in the Oxford English Dictionary is 'the condition or quality of being adequate or sufficient'; 'an adequate amount of something, especially of something essential'.
72. In 2010, the Government published statutory guidance<sup>8</sup>: "Sufficiency – Securing Sufficient Accommodation for Looked After Children". This document sought to improve outcomes for children looked after and young people by providing guidance on the implementation of section 22G of the Children Act 1989 ('the 1989 Act') – requiring local authorities to take reasonably practicable steps to secure sufficient accommodation within the authority's area which meets the needs of those children and within their area (the 'sufficiency duty').
73. The Ofsted inspection report highlighted:-
- 'The large number of older children and adolescents in care has reduced placement choice. (Para 14).*
74. The Panel heard that Children's Services planned to reduce the numbers of high cost external placements by shifting the balance to more preventative and edge of care work, whilst strengthening commissioning of placements and support for children and young people. Another essential strand to improving sufficiency is to improve social work and permanency practice.

#### Understanding the Child's Journey - A Pathway through Care

75. In order to gain a better understanding of the care system and processes from the child's perspective, the Panel received a presentation from the Directors and Heads of Service within Children's Services who used a fictitious family as an example case study, detailing each stage of the process from the point of initial referral up to leaving care.
76. A flow chart is provided below to demonstrate a summary of this process and details of each part of the service are provided at Appendix 1.

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<sup>8</sup> Sufficiency – Statutory Guidance on Securing Sufficient Accommodation for Looked After Children (March 2010)



## **Adoption**

77. Adoption Tees Valley (ATV) was established in 2018, in line with the Government's aim to see all local authorities with adoption responsibilities participate in Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) by 2020. The key drivers for this were that children were waiting too long to be adopted and to improve adoption support and outcomes for adopted children, whilst increasing the 'pool' of available adopters at regional levels.
78. ATV is the Regional Adoption Agency for the five Tees Valley Local Authorities of Middlesbrough, Stockton, Hartlepool, Darlington and Redcar and Cleveland and is responsible for: the recruitment, assessment and approval of adoptive families; receiving referrals of children for adoption; family finding; matching and placing the children with suitable, approved adopters; provision of adoption support; facilitating letterbox contact between adopted children and their birth families; life story books; step parent adoptions.

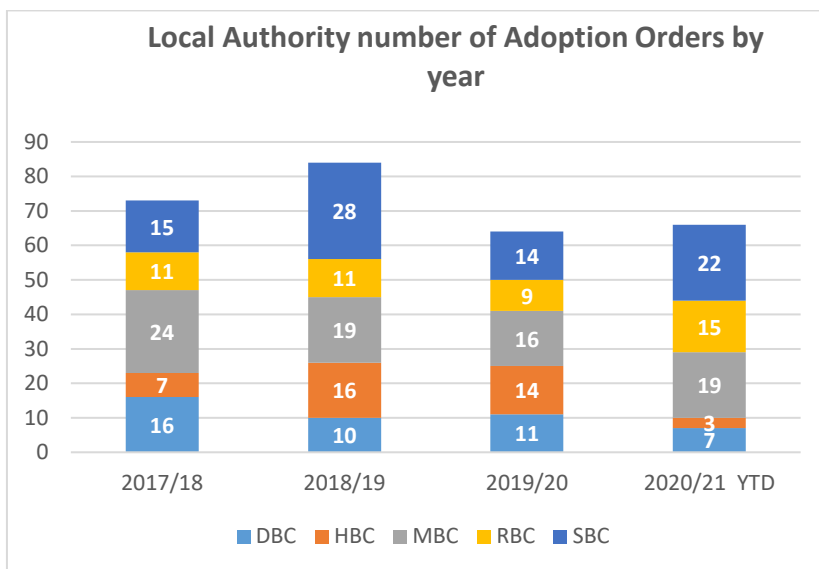
### **Recruitment of adopters**

79. The recruitment process, from the point of initial enquiry to formal notification to proceed with an application, takes an average of 101 days with ATV. Whilst this first stage exceeds ATV's own target of 60 days, it is shorter than the England average of 112 days.
80. The second stage of the process includes thorough assessments of potential adopters being undertaken by ATV Adoption Social Workers and, if deemed suitable, presentation to the ATV Family Placement Panel for a recommendation as to their suitability to adopt. The recommendation is then presented to the Agency Decision Maker for a final decision. Timescales for the second stage take, on average, an additional 129 days – slightly longer than ATV's target of 121 days, but shorter than the England average of 140 days. There is a fast-track process for applicants who have previously adopted, or who are already approved foster carers, with the whole process taking around 121 days (four months) in total.
81. During 2019/20 a total of 50 adopters were approved and as at the end of December 2020, an additional 45 adopters were approved, with a further 39 in the process of being assessed.
82. 71% of ATV approved adopters waited at least three months from the point of approval to being matched with a child which indicates that a relatively high number of adopters are matched quickly.
83. ATV has a dedicated Marketing Officer to support recruitment of adoptive parents. There is an ongoing social media presence as this method, together with anonymised profiling of children, has been identified as being a successful mechanism for recruitment. ATV has a significant social media reach, with over 7,000 facebook followers.
84. ATV works closely with the National Adoption Recruitment Steering Group and national campaigns. This group is centrally funded by DfE to impact on the numbers of children who are waiting to be adopted.
85. In 2020 ATV's recruitment campaign specifically focussed on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) children, who are identified as waiting the longest, and undertook regional work to promote national messaging, with profiles of its BAME adopters and social workers who presented as "the face of ATV". This resulted in ATV recruiting two further BAME families.
86. Additionally, ATV is undertaking work to promote the need for adopters of siblings as this is one of the biggest areas of need for the adoption service in the Tees Valley.

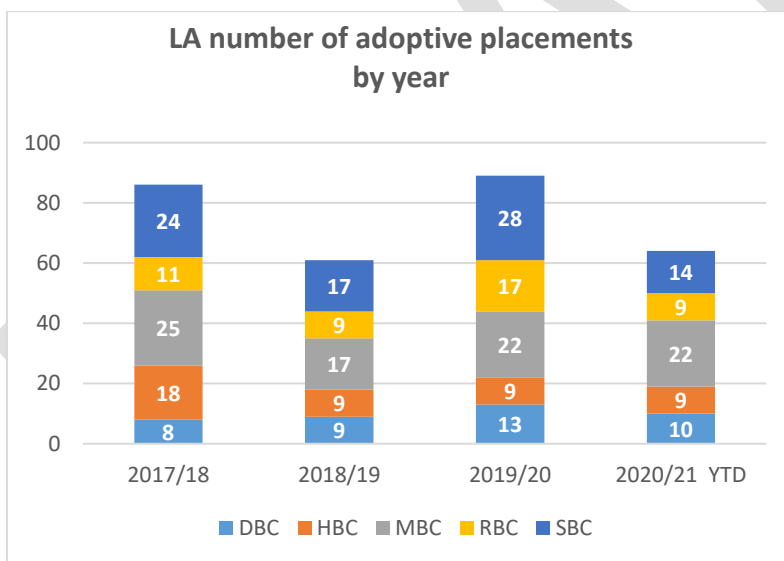
87. To support sufficiency, ATV has engaged in regional collaborative work with Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) and there is now a Regional protocol which is supported and signed up to by regional VAA's and RAA's. This aims for regionally approved adopters to be available to regional RAA's. As of the end of quarter 3 in 2020/21, ATV placed 15 children with regional VAA's, where external placements were required.

### Children and Placements

88. In terms of timescales for children who are waiting to be adopted, the Panel heard that the Government target from the point of a child entering care to having their plan for adoption approved is **183** days. This target is not being met nationally. As at Q3 2020/21 the national average is **245** days, however, all of the Tees Valley local authorities, including Middlesbrough (**217** days) are performing better than the national average (based on data provided by the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB)).
89. Once a Placement Order (PO) is achieved, the Government sets a target of **121** days from granting of a PO to matching a child with adopters. This is a particularly challenging timescale influenced by the matching characteristics and needs of the child and the numbers of available adopters.
90. In Middlesbrough the PO to match timescale averages **192** days and was better than the national average (**216** days) and the RRA average of **217** days. Middlesbrough's figure has reduced over several months up to April 2021. This improvement is partly attributed to Middlesbrough establishing a tighter performance monitoring system for social workers and introducing a monthly Permanence Monitoring Group, chaired by a senior manager, making decisions more quickly to reduce delay.
91. In addition, practice is improving in providing information to ATV to assist with family finding for children as good information sharing processes are critical to the timely achievement of a placement. Early permanence has been promoted through strategic work between ATV and Middlesbrough, including:-
- The appointment of a Permanence Champion by ATV – responsible for tracking and monitoring all cases from early notification onwards. Sharing of better quality information in a timely way enables ATV to potentially identify a suitable adoptive family, pre-Placement Order, so that the match can be scheduled and progressed quickly following the grant of a PO by the Court.
  - Workforce development to provide a better understanding of how to create an adoption plan. ATV supported this through a dedicated early permanence training workshop to Middlesbrough Social Workers and through further workshops at Middlesbrough's Practice Week.
92. Once the child is placed for adoption, the Placement to adoption order (AO) granted date is better than the Government target, and is better than the England average, and RAA average, based on the current data return.
93. The graph below shows that the number of Adoption Orders across the ATV region increased from a total of **64** in 2019/20 to **66** as at the end of Quarter 3 in 2020/21 and was expected to increase further to the end of the year. Middlesbrough's Adoption Orders increased from **16** in 2019/20 to **22** as at end of quarter 3 2020/21. This is reflective of increased focus within Middlesbrough on progressing permanency plans for children.



94. The graph below shows that in 2019/20, a total of **89** children were placed with adopters across the ATV region and **64** were placed with adopters as at the end of Q3 2020/21. The numbers of Middlesbrough children placed in adoptive placements is rising, from the lowest number – **17** - in 2018/19, to **22** in 2019/20 and **22** as at the end of Q3 2020/21. This shows improvement on the numbers of children being placed for adoption, and improved focus on permanency planning.



95. Timescales in respect of placements, from the point of the child coming into the care of the local authority, to being placed with their adoptive family, averaged **455** days nationally in 2019/20 and **498** days across ATV in 2019/20. Middlesbrough has a higher figure than the other Tees Valley Local Authorities which is reflective of Middlesbrough having more children who had waited longer to be placed. This included sibling groups and older children who tended to wait longer to be matched with adoptive families.
96. The national trend in 2019/20 saw a drop in the numbers of children being adopted, however, across the ATV region, numbers had increased – with **91** children being adopted. The reasons for this could be that the ATV region has a higher rate of children looked after, with a regional average of

150.5 per 10,000 population compared with 67 per 10,000 England average. As at the end of quarter three in 2020/21, Middlesbrough's average was 189 per 10,000.

97. As at quarter three 2020/21, the numbers of children across the Tees Valley with and agreed plan of adoption and with a Placement Order had significantly reduced year on year from 2019/20. However, up to Q3 2020/21 placement numbers are slightly lower than previous years – which was also the national picture - and Adoption Orders are comparable.
98. Active tracking of children progressing through care planning indicates that there continues to be a higher number of children for whom the local authority is planning adoption.
99. Published data from the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB) up to Q3 2020/21 (over a 12 month period rolling average), shows that of **69** children adopted during this period, **51** are identified as being in the harder to place category. This includes: Being part of a sibling group; Being age 5+; Being a child with a disability; BAME. 73% of children placed via ATV and adopted in this period are deemed “hard to place.”
100. As at April 2021, Middlesbrough had five children - aged 5 and over - and five sibling groups adopted within the last year, including two sibling groups of three. 15 out of 25 children adopted in the 12 months (April 2020 to April 2021) were considered to be in the ‘hard to place’ category.
101. Some children, especially those who are older, will require more time to be prepared for adoption. It is important for family finding to select the right family who are well-prepared for taking that child/children.
102. The Panel heard that some of the key challenges for ATV are:-
  - Sufficiency of adopters for children with more complex needs (including siblings, older children and BAME children).
  - Volume of life-story work and obtaining information to produce meaningful life story books.
  - Waiting times for post-adoption support.
  - Volume and management of the post-box adoption contact service.
  - Step parent adoptions.



## **TERM OF REFERENCE C – PERMANENCY**

### **b) To examine any initiatives and areas of best practice.**

103. Various workstreams are ongoing to address the issue of placement sufficiency and to strengthen permanency. Below, is an overview of some of that work:-

#### **Corporate Parenting Strategy – Permanency and Sufficiency Strategies**

104. On 16 March 2021, the Council's Executive ratified the Corporate Parenting Strategy. The Strategy sets out the Council's vision and action plan for how the Council and its partners will support the children in its care, and care leavers, to achieve the best possible outcomes in their lives.
105. Both the Permanency and Sufficiency Strategies have been revised and now sit within the overarching Corporate Parenting Strategy. Each element was shaped by the voice and participation of children and young people in Middlesbrough.
106. The main purpose of the Permanency Strategy is to “ensure that all children and young people in our care are growing up in stable, secure, safe and nurturing living arrangements, and are supported in a positive transition to independence and adult life. This is reflected in our social work practice, and in our systems, processes and partnerships for permanency. The provocations (strong prompts) from our Futures for Families programme provide a critical reference point for us as we strive to improve the quality and impact of our permanence arrangements for children and young people in Middlesbrough.”
107. The purpose of the Sufficiency Strategy, or Sufficiency Plan, is to “set out a clear framework of for how we will work with our partners across Middlesbrough and the surrounding area to secure the best possible range of placement opportunities and support services for our children in care and our care leavers.”
108. The Corporate Parenting Strategy recognises the progressive increase in the proportionate balance of spend on support for children in care, and the increasing proportion of children presenting with acute and complex needs illustrates the scale of challenge as children's services forward-plans and forecasts. To meet this business-critical challenge a clear three-pronged approach was established:-
- To improve social work and permanency practice
  - To strengthen the coherence and impact of sufficiency and commissioning arrangements
  - To progressively rebalance resources towards prevention and support for children and young people on the edge of care.

#### **Improving Social Work Practice**

109. The Panel heard that improving Social Work practice is central to supporting better outcomes for children and young people and securing permanency outcomes. Subsequently, Middlesbrough has developed a Social Work Practice Model, in conjunction with the workforce – ‘Children and Relationships First’. The practice model is a key component of the improvement journey and builds on regional and national innovation in Children's Services.
110. Children's Services has introduced a new Centre for Practice Excellence which supports the practice model as well as a co-ordinated approach to driving innovation and best practice across

the whole system of support for children and young people, including permanence arrangements. It offers tools and resources to support the practice model, workforce development to ensure staff have the skills and knowledge they need to deliver commitments to local children and young people and quality assurance arrangements and opportunities to share and develop best practice.

111. The Corporate Parenting Strategy sets out, in detail, the social work practice pathway for achieving permanence in Middlesbrough, providing a reference point for professional practice and decision-making. In summary, by considering the most appropriate options available via Early Help, Entry to Care, Forever Families and Futures for Families, a clear pathway to achieving permanence for children and young people is considered, as follows:-
- Where safe and achievable, every attempt will be made to support the child to remain at home with their family – the Futures for Families Programme will drive innovation and best practice in this area of work.
  - Where it is necessary for a child or young person to leave home, the first consideration will be to find suitable accommodation with family or close adult friends.
  - A child or young person will only ever remain in care for the shortest possible period needed in order to manage a safe return home.
  - If safe to do so, a robust plan will be put in place with the child/young person and their family to support a return home.
  - If it is not possible to return home, early plans will be made for a suitable alternative placement.
  - Permanence will always be secured through the most appropriate legal order to meet the child/young person's needs.
  - Where it is not possible/appropriate for the child/young person to remain within their family network, alternative permanent carers will be identified. This may be through Adoption, Long-Term Foster Care, Child Arrangement Order or a Special Guardianship Order.
  - If an older child wants to live independently, and assessments suggest this is suitable, a plan to achieve this will be developed with the young person.

#### Initiatives/Best Practice

112. Some of the ways in which the local authority is trying to address the numbers of children coming into care and to ensure that those in care were placed locally were through the following initiatives.

#### Futures for Families

113. In 2019, the Government announced that, as part of its 'Strengthening Families Protecting Children Programme' (SFPC), it would be investing £84 million over five years to support 20 local authorities to improve work with families and reduce the number of children entering care.
114. The Programme would support the selected local authorities to deliver one of three children's social care innovation programme projects in their own area.
115. Middlesbrough was subsequently successful in being selected as the Trailblazer authority for the 'No Wrong Door' programme and awarded funding to deliver the programme in Middlesbrough, in partnership with North Yorkshire.
116. No Wrong Door had operated successfully in North Yorkshire offering an integrated service approach to support adolescents with complex needs. Working in hubs, it brings together a range of housing options, services and outreach support under one management team, meaning that a young person's needs can be addressed within a single team.

117. North Yorkshire had worked with Middlesbrough to develop a bespoke Service which was launched in September 2020 in Middlesbrough as Futures for Families.
118. Based on North Yorkshire's '*No Wrong Door*' model, and with assistance from North Yorkshire Children's Services, Middlesbrough developed its own bespoke service - '*Futures for Families*' - which launched in September 2020.
119. Operationally, *Futures for Families* operates from Thorntree Hub, providing rapid response to children and families in crisis who need support to prevent family breakdown. The multi-disciplinary team based at the Hub offers 'edge of care' support to prevent a young person at risk of coming into care, and also provides support to children and families in 'fragile' placements via specific planned work and residential respite, where needed. The aim is to help families stay together, safely, and to provide positive futures for young people.
120. From its launch in September 2020 up to the start of December 2020, Futures for Families was providing edge of care support to a total of 39 young people in fragile placements and regular in-reach support to a total of 15 young people.
121. An initial impact study carried out by Innovate and North Yorkshire Council, based on the care experiences of 40 young people – showed that many of the young people identified that they had struggled with the transition from primary to secondary school. This has resulted in Futures for Families offering support for children aged 11-25 rather than 12-25 in order to provide school transition support. The outcomes of the study have helped to inform improved practice across Social Work Teams.
122. Of the total number of young people accessing support from Futures for Families:-
- 75% receive support from the Life Coach, either directly or indirectly.
  - 92% had no previously identified need.
  - 32.5% had a previously undiagnosed speech and language difficulty – 95% of which were male.
123. Data activity on each type of intervention shows that building relationships and emotional and mental health support are the highest support provision streams.
124. Futures for Families also supports young people who go missing from care. Between November 2020 and November 2021, 94 recorded missing episodes were attributed to 11 young, however, due to targeted outreach work, there was a reduction of between 50 and 100% in missing episodes and 36% had experienced no further missing episodes since receiving support from Futures for Families.
125. As at December 2020, Futures for Families was supporting nine young people to return to their families or a connected persons/foster placement from expensive residential placements.

### Innovate

126. Placement data has shown that long term permanence is not achieved quickly enough; too many children are placed on Care Orders with parents; too many children were in residential care and not enough were placed with Middlesbrough Council employed foster carers; Special Guardianship Orders were not used often enough as a permanency option; and not enough children are being adopted.

127. In response to some of these issues, a managed team of Social Workers – Innovate – was commissioned in July 2020 in order to progress 90 children subject to Care Orders. The aim is to improve outcomes for children and to reduce the numbers of children looked after in Middlesbrough by providing permanence; placement stability and support from residential placements back into family life.
128. The Team works with four key cohorts:-
- Children in residential placements.
  - Children placed with parents where the discharge of a Care Order is required.
  - Children living with a Connected Persons Foster Carer where the plan is to progress to a Special Guardianship Order.
  - Children living with a Foster Carer where support is needed to prevent the placement breaking down and a future move.
129. During a relatively short period of time, from July 2020 to December 2020, the impact of the work undertaken by the Innovate Team is notable. For example, of 19 children in external residential placements, 17 were assessed as suitable to be moved (having had their assessments and care plans fully reviewed). Six of the 17 children were moved closer to Middlesbrough – either rehabilitated back home (3) or in foster care placements (3) and the remaining 11 had either a definite or anticipated moving date<sup>9</sup>.
130. Ten children were subject to Care Orders whilst placed with parents, all of which were subject to court proceedings. However, the work of Innovate meant that as at December 2020 three had their Care Orders revoked with the remainder expected to be revoked imminently. In all cases the children cease to be 'looked after' once the Care Order is discharged.
131. Intensive intervention was also undertaken with 16 children in fragile placements where a breakdown would have resulted in a further move or an escalation to residential care. However, all 16 are being successfully maintained in their current placements.
132. 45 of the cohort of 90 children were placed in Connected Persons Foster Care placements. The Innovate Team had assessed and worked with those children and families to achieve the following outcomes:-
- Three children rehabilitated back home and a further six were in the process of being rehabilitated back home due to sustained changes made by parents.
  - 22 children were actively moving down the Special Guardianship Order pathway.
  - 14 children were subject to further negotiations and planning with possible guardians, with nearly all expected to go ahead.
133. There are also financial benefits to the Innovate Team's work. In terms of moving young people closer to Middlesbrough and within the Council's Foster Care network approximate cost reductions of £797,000 per year, based on four young people, were realised whereas preventing a move to residential care resulted in a cost avoidance of approximately £2,881 per child. Reductions in the

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<sup>9</sup> The remaining two children in external residential placements were in their final year of secondary school and it was considered not appropriate to move them whilst in their GCSE year.

length of time spent in care resulted in a cost avoidance of approximately £189 per child per week.

## PAUSE

134. Pause is a national charity that works with women who have experienced, or are at risk of, repeat removals of children from their care. Through an intensive programme of support, it aims to break the cycle of repeat removals and give women the opportunity to reflect, tackle destructive patterns of behaviour and to develop new skills and responses that can help them create a more positive future. Pause aims to prevent the damaging consequences of thousands more children being taken into care.
135. The North East Pause project has been running successfully in the Tyne and Wear region since 2016 and recently extended into Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland and Stockton (with contracts in place in Middlesbrough since August 2020).
136. Nationally, Pause operates 30 practices across 39 local authorities and works with around 344 women who have had 1,052 children removed collectively. On average, each woman receiving support has had between three and four children removed, although this is much higher in some cases.
137. Details of the work undertaken by Pause can be found on their website (<https://www.pause.org.uk/>), but in general terms Pause Practitioners typically work with six to eight women, building a secure, consistent relationship which helps to focus on each woman's needs and encourages them to work towards a more positive future. They do this using a range of group activities, day trips and drop in sessions on matters including healthy cooking on a budget and crafts.
138. Such activities help to build self-esteem, reduce social isolation, and manage loss through reducing the stigma of child removal through peer support, shared experience, and role modelling positive behaviours and trying new things.
139. Following an initial 16-week engagement phase, women are asked to commit to a pause in pregnancy should they choose to commence the Pause Programme, with appropriate support mechanisms and services in place.
140. During the course of this review, Pause found 162 women were eligible for support in Middlesbrough and the details of 18 women considered at risk of repeat pregnancies, and subsequent removal of the child, were forwarded by Children's Services.
141. Pause is commissioned to work with **10** women in Middlesbrough, who have had a total of **28** children removed from their care (an average of three children per woman). The women range in age from **23 to 41 years** (the average age being 28 years). **22%** of the women have **care experience**. Further details of the women engaged with Pause can be found at Appendix 2.
142. To enhance their service, Pause is continuing to build effective partnerships with a range of organisations including:-
  - Impact Teesside (grief and loss group for women on the Pause programme due to start in August 2021)
  - My Sister's Place

- Virgin Care Sexual Health Services
- Adoption Tees Valley (frontline partnership working)
- Middlesbrough Adult Safeguarding (frontline partnership working)

143. The effectiveness of the Pause Programme was reviewed by the Department for Education following an evaluation carried out by the University of Sussex, Research in Practice and Ipsos Mori. The evaluation's findings, published in November 2020, found:-

*"The Pause Programme is effective in making a positive difference in women's lives, improving their relationships with children, reducing rates of infant care entry in local areas and delivering cost savings for local areas."*

144. The evaluation also found that, across five sites over a three-year period, the number of infants entering care reduced by 14.4 per local authority area – equating to 215 children in total.
145. Financially, the estimated benefit to cost ratios associated with these effects are £4.50 per £1 spent on Pause over 4 years and £7.61 per £1 spent over 18 years.
146. More locally, the benefits of the Pause Programme were highlighted when 17 women across Stockton, Redcar and Cleveland and Middlesbrough were asked to self-report over a six month period on a range of areas using scaling questions (1 being worst and 10 being best). Using these metrics Pause found the women reported relationships improving with children from just above 4 to almost an 8.
147. The women also reported a significant improvement in their emotional and mental health with just 3% describing their emotional and mental health as being 'good' at the start of the programme increasing to 60%.
148. Pause's work in Middlesbrough is at an early stage, so its impact is still being learned, however, both Pause and Middlesbrough's Children's Services work together to refer cases when required.

#### 'Green Shoots'

149. In December 2020, the Panel heard how 'green shoots' had been identified since the Ofsted inspection, due to the work of Futures for Families and Innovate.

#### Connected Persons Carers

150. 30% of Middlesbrough's children looked after were placed in a connected carer placement (family members or friends and the child subject of a Care Order). This was the most prevalent placement type.
151. In the 12 months up to December 2020, 167 children ceased to be looked after and almost half of those exited a connected care placement. This meant that Children's Services is better at moving children into permanence via a Special Guardianship Order or back home than from any other placement type.
152. Between July and October 2020 more connected carer placements had ceased (33) than had started (31). Encouragingly, forecasts show that, based on a three month average, there was a decline in the use of connected carer placements which was partly driven by improved throughput of care case work and a shift in care planning as greater exploration of placements that best suited

the child's needs was being undertaken. Progress was being made but this was still an area that required improvement.

#### Placement with Parent

153. 'Placement with Parent' occurs when a child is subject to a Care Order (looked after by the local authority) but lives with a parent. Such placements should be short term, temporary, arrangements.
154. Traditionally, Middlesbrough has a high number of placements of this nature partly attributed to a legacy of poor social work practice. This has resulted in the Courts lacking confidence in the process resulting in Care Orders being put in place to provide additional oversight.
155. However, audits suggest such Care Orders have not improved social care oversight meaning many families remain on Care Orders for long periods. The result is that either Care Orders should have been discharged much earlier or, in some cases, a child is left in neglectful situations for too long, resulting in them being taken into care. The Panel heard that relationships between Children's Services and the Courts were being strengthened to try and mitigate these occurrences.
156. It was reported that as of the end of October 2020, 87 children were in placements with parents, which had increased by 20% since October 2019. Such placements had increased by 13% in the last six months but reduced by 1% in the last three months. On average, children subject to Care Orders spent 16 months in their placement with parents. 36 of those children were placed with parents for longer than one year; 21 were placed for more than two years; and 10 were placed for more than three years.
157. Data shows that, in the three months up to December 2020, for the first time ever, more children ceased to be looked after in placements with parents (16 children) than those that started being looked after in this placement type (12 children).

#### External, Residential and Fostering Placements

158. Foster care provides children and young people with stable, loving homes when their own families are unable to do so. In-house fostering refers to foster carers who are approved and registered with Middlesbrough Council and Independent foster carers are those who are approved and registered with Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs), external to Middlesbrough Council. Carers can provide a range of placements including respite, short term and long term care. Long term foster care can be a suitable permanency option for many children. Indeed, as at 31 March 2019, 28% of children looked after in England were recorded as being in long term foster homes.
159. Residential care refers to children's homes and can placements can be provided within Middlesbrough Council-run homes (in-house) or by private providers (external residential).
160. As part of a concerted effort to make best use of all available capacity in the system, Middlesbrough had a total of **177** in-house foster care placements (as of December 2020) with the intention of increasing this number to meet national averages. Initiatives to enhance the provision of in-house fostering included a recruitment drive, strengthening of foster care management and the broadening of approval criteria in order to use resources more widely. Also, as of December 2020, there were **154** Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) placements.
161. Between June and December 2020, there was a reduction of 4% in the use of external residential placements and an increase in the use of in-house foster carers by 14%, allowing Social Workers to maintain children in local foster care placements and to reduce the cost of external placements.

## Forecasting and Target Setting

162. On 28 July 2021, Children's Services provided information to the Overview and Scrutiny Board in relation to forecasting and target setting within the Service.
163. Children's Services has developed a set of seven proxy-indicators with indicative targets based on statistical neighbour averages. The indicators aim to support LMT decision-making and scrutiny by providing a clear framework for understanding the progressive impact of Children's Services improvements on combined Council resources.
164. Building on progress over the last 12 months, Children's Services has set an ambition to achieve the statistical neighbour average for the overall rate of children looked after over the next three years. This would bring Middlesbrough's rates of children looked after in line with: Rochdale, Stoke-on-Trent, Tameside, Salford, Knowsley, Blackpool, Hull, Hartlepool, Halton and South Tyneside.
165. The target setting was evidence led and based on moving progressively from Middlesbrough's current children looked after population towards the statistical neighbour average over three years; forecasting future placement distribution based on established trends between 2020-21; and would be modified to take account of in-depth modelling of projected additional reductions in external residential and increases in internal fostering numbers resulting from improvement plan initiatives.
166. Identified risks in progress included unknown and emerging modifying factors (eg Covid, placement sufficiency); slow down rate of improvement and ongoing practice legacy issues; increases in national/regional/statistical neighbour looked after children averages.
167. See the table below for the indicators:-

Indicator	Polarity	June 2020 (baseline Jan 2021)	June 2021	Target 2021/22	Target 2022/23	Target 2023/24	Target Detail
1. Number of substantive posts filled with agency social workers	Lower is better	64	50	48	30	23	Reduce to national average of 23%
2. Number of children in care (No/rate)	Lower is better	670 (202.2)	545 (164.5)	502	459	416 (125.5)	Reduce to SN average
3. Number of children placed in external residential placements	Lower is better	74	58	47	37	35	Reduce to modelled Boro target
4. Number of children placed in in-house residential provision	Higher is better	9	19	21	22	23	Increase to modelled Boro target
5. Number of children placed with in-house foster carers	Higher is better	160	170	169	175	185	Increase to modelled Boro target
6. Number of children placed with IFA carers	Lower is better	168	164	159	143	121	Reduce to modelled Boro target



7. Proportion of placement moves in the reporting period which have incurred less cost (excludes same cost movements)	Higher is better	64.6% (Q1 20-21)	66.7% (Q1 21-22)	68.8%	70.9%	73.0%	Incremental year on year increase
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## **TERM OF REFERENCE D – PERMANENCY**

### **To challenge people's perceptions of children in care and to create a better understanding of Children Looked After for everyone involved in the process**

168. Given the high numbers of children looked after in Middlesbrough, the Panel also wished to explore perceptions of children in care and how negative perceptions and stigma around the care system could be challenged and better understood.
169. Whilst exploring the issue of challenging negative perceptions, the Panel was able to draw on first-hand experience of one of its Members who had experienced the care system as a young person. This provided the Panel with some insight into how a young person might feel and their thoughts prior to, and during, becoming a looked after child and when leaving care.
170. The Member advised that, in his own case, he was placed with several different family members but this was not necessarily the best course of action as this placed tremendous pressure on those family members and ultimately led to additional moves to placements with foster carers. The Panel also heard how, in the Member's experience, there was a perception, because of his age, that he was the problem as he was viewed as being too old to be fostered long term.
171. It is this instability, and constant movement, that can lead to negative perceptions of children in care. The example provided to the Panel demonstrated that having far fewer material possessions prior to being taken into care could impact negatively on appearance in this case a lack of suitable clothing. Importantly, there are also perceptions of young people that can be unrepresentative and unfair. For example, as heard by the Panel, young people being referred to as a 'gang' or 'group of yobs' was particularly misleading. For example, some young people in care gathered together as they were in similar circumstances and did this in order to feel secure and to feel that they belonged to something. Sometimes the groups could appear rowdy but they were not trying to intimidate people or intending to be loud but this was often the only way their voice would be heard.
172. The Panel heard how increased sense of empathy towards children in care and for others to adopt a more child centric approach could make a child's pathway through the care system much easier. Fortunately, in the example provided to the Panel, the Member recalled that due to several Social Workers, Teachers and Foster Carers adopting a more child centred, empathetic and non-judgemental approach, helped both he and his sibling in being successful in their chosen careers.
173. Whilst perceptions of children in care are somewhat entrenched, and not always complementary, there is work being carried out to change those perceptions. Such work is wide ranging through internal and external initiatives.
174. For example, the Panel Member with first-hand experience of the care system welcomed the transition to work placements for young people in care and care leavers – as referred to under 'Community Learning' at Appendix 1 – as this provides additional support to young people in care, or care leavers, to assist them in gaining apprenticeships and employment.
175. Externally, organisations such as 'Become Charity' work with a range of stakeholders to change perceptions of children in care.

## Become Charity

176. Become Charity is a national, independent charity for children in care and young care leavers, providing advice and support to care experienced children and young people in several ways including:-
- A dedicated Care Advice Line – Confidential phone line or email service providing advice to any child or young person in care or care leaver.
  - Coaching - For ages 16-27: help to identify and achieve goals and overcome barriers.
  - Weekly Link Up meetings – Virtual hang out for children and young people to chat, take part in activities and quizzes.
  - Propel – website for care leavers providing information on the support available in higher education settings.
  - Care Factsheets – provision of free factsheets on various subjects designed to help children in care and care leavers.
177. Become also provides support and training for professionals working with care experienced children and young people.
178. One of Become's strategic aims is to change attitudes towards care experienced children and young people in society and the Panel heard about specific work the Charity has undertaken in respect of this.
179. In 2017, Become undertook specific research – 'Perceptions of Care' [[Become - Perceptions of Care \(2017\) \(becomecharity.org.uk\)](#)] with children in care to explore how they felt they were perceived by others in society, including teachers, social workers and their peers.
180. The work involved dialogue and feedback with focus groups and an online survey. The key statistics that resulted from the study are highlighted as follows:-
- 50% of children in care and 51% of care leavers agreed that "People think it is the children's fault that they are in care."
  - 39% of children in care and 43% of care leavers disagreed with the statement "Other children's parents do not treat children in care differently to other children."
  - 30% of children in care and 42% of care leavers agreed with the statement that "Where I live, people would not like it if someone opened a children's home."
181. Many young people in care feel that there are many assumptions and stereotypes made with regard to children in care and the care system and stigma can be difficult to identify, however, ill-founded perceptions could be attributed to a lack of knowledge and education about the care system.
182. Here are some of the views expressed by the young people who took part in the study:-
- Children who are in care are trouble makers or cause anti-social behaviour.
  - Children are in care because they (the child) have done something wrong.
  - Often young people in care are expected to fail due to low aspirations set by professionals.
  - Young people who had encountered the Police for the first time often felt they were treated like criminals even when they had done nothing wrong and that incorrect assumptions were often made about them being involved in anti-social behaviour or drug taking for example.
  - Young people did not want others to feel sorry for them or treated as if they were more fragile than their peers.

- Young people did not want to be labelled as 'children in care', they just wanted to be children. This was a particular concern of children in school – they did not want to be 'singled out'. They did not want to be treated differently to their peers – whether that be in a negative way or sometimes in an overly-sympathetic way to compensate for them being in care.

"We are expected to fail and it is a stigma. I hated telling people I was in care because it feels like people judge you."

183. During recent discussions with young people in relation to what it meant to be a care leaver, Become found that many young care leavers spoke about being socially intelligent and able to navigate bureaucracy well. Reference was also made to the use of the word resilience when referring to children in care and care leavers and in such contexts it was something that was celebrated, however, many of the young people found this uncomfortable as they considered resilience not to be a choice.
184. Become also found that consistently care leavers appeared to be more aware than those in care of differences in how they are portrayed compared to their peers.
185. A follow up study was undertaken in 2018 – 'Teachers Who Care' [Become - Teachers Who Care (2018) (becomecharity.org.uk)] – which looked at teacher training and supporting children in care in schools.
186. The study aimed to find out whether teachers had heard similar views expressed as those highlighted by children in care, and included a series of questions in relation to knowledge, attitudes and stigma around children in care and were answered by more than 450 teachers.
187. The study found that **87%** of respondents had heard at least one colleague express a negative generalisation about children in care and **37%** of respondents had heard such views often.
188. The Teachers Who Care 2018 report made nine recommendations (which can be viewed in the link to the document in para194) to schools, training providers, Government and Local Authorities, including a call for the introduction of mandatory training on working with children in care in all schools for all teachers both before and after they qualified.
189. The findings of the report were developed into a resource, "I Wish You Knew" [Become - I Wish You Knew (2019) (becomecharity.org.uk)], highlighting the six key things children in care wished their teachers to know about their experience:-
  1. What being in care really means.
  2. We all have potential.
  3. I don't want to be treated differently.
  4. No child in care is the same.
  5. It's not because we are not trying.
  6. What a big difference you can make.
190. The Panel also considered how the use of language and dialogue in and around the care system could amplify people's responses. For example, 'myth-busting' often had the opposite effect in practice, either reinforcing existing stereotypes or introducing stereotypes to people who were previously unaware.

191. In addition, Become provides secretariat support for the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for children looked after and care leavers. This is a cross-parliamentary group of MPs and Peers that have an interest in improving the care system and promoting good quality government policy-making. Become launched a spotlight inquiry particularly exploring themes around care and community around the country. This included holding a series of evidence gathering sessions and reaching out to young people to find out how they had been supported to feel part of their local or wider communities and how local communities had been supported to respect and better understand the care experienced members.

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## **CONCLUSIONS**

192. Based on the evidence provided throughout the investigation, the Panel's conclusions are as follows:-

- a) The Panel wishes to acknowledge that due to the need for Children's Services to improve with urgency and pace, significant progress has been made since the Panel commenced its review. This is supported by the Department for Education's Children's Commissioner recommending that Children's Services in Middlesbrough no longer required oversight by the Commissioner and was endorsed by the Minister for Children and Families in July 2021.
- b) The Panel also acknowledges that improvements were made despite significant demand on services coupled with the Covid pandemic which called for alternative and inventive ways of working.
- c) The Panel recognises that whilst the number of children looked after in Middlesbrough remains high, it has significantly reduced – with a 19.5% reduction during the period November 2020 to November 2021.
- d) The Panel feels reassured that since the start of its review, significant improvements have been made across Children's Services in Middlesbrough, with the following areas most recently noted as having improved by Ofsted:-
  - Senior managers are realistic and know their service – they are aware of progress and areas that still require improvement.
  - Social Worker caseloads have begun to reduce.
  - There is stronger practice in relation to immediate safeguarding concerns and in support provision for children in need where serious concerns exist and they are on the 'edge of care'.
  - Social Workers are enthusiastic and know their children and families well and are committed to improving their lives.
- e) The Panel also notes positive progress has been made in the following areas:-
  - An increase in the numbers of children being adopted, where it is in their best interests, with more Middlesbrough children being adopted than from any other Tees Valley local authority in the last 12 months up to December 2021. Parallel planning has been improved between Middlesbrough's fostering service and Adoption Tees Valley. In addition, Adoption Tees Valley continues to promote interest in adopting through continuous recruitment events managed by a dedicated Marketing Officer.
  - A significant reduction in the number of children living in connected carer placements and an increase in the number of children whose permanency has been secured via Special Guardianship orders.
  - A 50% reduction in the number of children residing in Placements with Parents during the 12 month period to August 2021.
  - A significant reduction in external residential placements in the six months up to December 2021.

- An increase in young people being placed in Middlesbrough residential provision.
  - An increase in the use of in-house foster care placements as opposed to Independent Foster Agency placements.
- f) The Panel is aware that there are areas of the service that require further development and is keen to ensure it is kept updated on progress.
- g) The Panel heard that Children's Services has implemented a sophisticated data analysis package to monitor demand, impact and trends and to support improved performance reporting and social work practice. A raft of Performance Management Framework indicators are in place and appropriate scorecards are being developed by the Service Area and Children's Services Improvement Advisor, with input from the relevant Chairs, for use by this Scrutiny Panel, the Children and Young People's Learning Scrutiny Panel and Corporate Parenting Board for governance and assurance purposes. The Service has also developed a set of seven proxy indicators with indicative targets based on statistical neighbour averages with the ambition of achieving the statistical neighbour average for children looked after over the next three years.
- h) The Panel recognises that the Futures for Families Service has been successful in providing support for young people on the edge of care and has prevented 37 young people becoming looked after. The service also provides support to fragile placements and placement stability has improved.
- i) The Panel notes that there have been improvements in practice with consistently high numbers of children looked after being seen by social workers; improved management oversight of cases; consistently high (99%) numbers of children looked after having a recorded Personal Education Plan and more than 90% of children looked after health assessments being carried out. The Panel notes that an area for improvement is dental assessments where 66% of children looked after have had an assessment in the last 12 months, however, this has also been impacted by Covid.
- j) The Panel is aware of the need to increase the number of Middlesbrough foster carers in order to provide sufficient local placements for Middlesbrough children and acknowledges that in-house capacity has been increased due to continued foster carer recruitment drives and a range of initiatives including managed social work teams (Innovate) specifically working to: bring children from expensive external placements back to Middlesbrough; reduce the number of children placed with parents on care orders (where safe to do so); progressing plans for Special Guardianship where children live with a connected persons carer; and ensuring support is provided for children living with foster carers where the placement is at risk of breaking down. This work has realised significant cost reductions. The Panel acknowledges that there are specific groups of young people for whom more specialised carers/placements are required including older children/teens, parent and baby placements, sibling groups, children with complex needs and/or disabilities, children from minority ethnic groups and that these children can wait longer for permanent homes.
- k) A Corporate Parenting Strategy has been devised and adopted which includes a Permanency Strategy and Sufficiency Strategic sitting within it. Each strategy was shaped by input from children and young people in Middlesbrough.

- l) The Panel heard that Children's Services had developed a social work practice model 'Children and Relationships First', developed with the workforce. This was supported by the recently established Centre for Practice Excellence which, as well as supporting the practice model, provides co-ordination to driving innovation and best practice across the whole system of support for children and young people and offers tools and resources to support the practice model, workforce development, quality assurance arrangements and opportunities to share and develop best practice.
- m) The Panel recognises the excellent work being undertaken by Pause, a national charity working with women who have experienced, or are at risk of, repeat removals of children from their care. Pause offers an intensive support programme with the aim of breaking the cycle of repeat removals by supporting women to tackle destructive patterns of behaviour and to develop new skills and responses to create a positive future. Pause is currently working with 11 women in Middlesbrough.
- n) In terms of improving perceptions of children in care, the Panel is encouraged to learn that increased engagement is taking place with children in care and care leavers through Participation People and is supportive of this being developed going forward.



## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

193. Based on the evidence gathered during the investigation, and the conclusions above, the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel makes the following recommendations for consideration by the Executive:-
- a) The Panel supports the sustained efforts being made to reduce the number of children looked after in Middlesbrough in line with our regional statistical neighbours and that the performance scorecard being reported to LMT on a six-weekly basis in relation to this indicator be shared with the Panel on a quarterly basis.
  - b) The Panel notes the high percentage of children (15.1%) who become looked after at birth and recommends that a specific piece of work be undertaken to establish why this is the case and that this work includes performance information and exploration of whether further interventions can be put in place to reduce this figure. If appropriate, a set of performance indicators should be identified to monitor improvement over the next year in the first instance.
  - c) That analysis be undertaken to identify any potential gaps in child protection provision in the more ethnically diverse wards and further work be undertaken to provide assurance that the statistical under representation/over representation of children of different ethnicities being looked after by the local authority aligns with the level of need amongst these groups.
  - d) That work is undertaken to identify how the provision of Early Help can be increased in North Ormesby, (subject to further analysis and if this remains appropriate), and that the recommendations put forward by this Panel in its Final Report on 'Locality Working from a Children's Services Perspective' regarding further assessment of demand and the number of Early Help workers assigned to the areas, be taken forward.
  - e) That the sustained efforts to increase the number of children being placed in an in-house foster placement be continued and that the targets established remain a key priority indicator for the service and performance be regularly reported to the Panel.
  - f) The Panel appreciates the challenges faced by the service in relation to the recruitment and retention of Foster Carers and the continuous efforts being made to increase in-house Foster Carer provision. It is recommended that additional feedback is sought from Foster Carers leaving Middlesbrough's Fostering Service to ensure that the information gained through the satisfaction surveys is fully utilised to focus on continuing improvement in this area.
  - g) The Panel notes that there is currently very little advertising across the town to indicate that Middlesbrough Council needs and wants more people to become in-house foster carers. The Panel recommends that the work to increase the number of carers continues with pace and focus on additional advertising and marketing which should be analysed to improve awareness of the continuous need for more people to become in-house foster carers.
  - h) The Panel appreciates that an essential strand to improving sufficiency is to continue to improve social work practice. It is acknowledged that numerous initiatives have been put in place to achieve this including the introduction of a Social Work Practice Model, a new Centre for Practice Excellence, the development of the Corporate Parenting Strategy, the work undertaken by the Future for Families Team, the commissioning of Innovate Teams and the effectiveness of the PAUSE project. However, whilst the Panel acknowledges improvements in the reduction of the use of Connected Carer Placements and Placements with Parents, it remains an area for

improvement, and it is recommended that performance data is regularly presented to the panel in respect of these elements.

- i) The Panel recognises that particular progress has been made in strengthening the auditing process which provides a wide and in-depth coverage of the quality of services, however, a small proportion of social work practice continues to be identified as 'inadequate' through the audits. Whilst the Panel notes the continuing reduction in 'inadequate' practice, it recommends that increased focus is placed on addressing poor quality practice through increased management oversight, support, guidance and training identified as appropriate for individuals, as set out in the Children's Services improvement plan.
- j) The Panel would also reinforce that the day to day lived experience of the child should be at the heart of all social work practice and that this should be a key feature of learning and development to improve practice and a key part of the auditing process.
- k) That the improvement in the number of children being placed for adoption over the period 2018/19 (17) to 2020/21 (22) be continued alongside the improved focus on permanency planning.
- l) That progress against the set of seven proxy indicators with indicative targets based on statistical neighbour averages be reported to the panel and OSB on a quarterly basis.
- m) That mandatory training to provide a basic awareness of the Children's Social Care system, including information regarding key terms and phrases, be provided to all Council staff and Elected Members through the Middlesbrough Learns platform and that this be completed on an annual basis.
- n) That the local authority considers the use of certain terminology and acronyms that can be perceived as negative in relation to children in care/care leavers and that this be considered in conjunction with the young people themselves via the Children in Care Council, Care Leavers Forum and other participation routes.
- o) That the Participation Officer be asked to undertake a piece of work with children in care and care leavers through the various forums that have been established, to obtain their views around their experiences of the care system, what works well, what does not work well and to present their findings to the Panel and the Corporate Parenting Board.
- p) That opportunities are maximised to continually gather the views of children and young people in care, care leavers and their carers that can be used to shape and drive service improvement within the system.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Rachel Farnham	Director of Children's Care
Rob Brown	Director of Education & Partnerships
Victoria Banks	Head of the Virtual School
Caroline Cannon	Head of SEN & Vulnerable Learners
Kay Dargue	Head of Partnerships
Trevor Dunn	Head of Access to Education
Gail Earl	Head of Prevention
Claire Kemp	Community Learning & Employability Manager
Amanda Richardson-Roe	Head of Referral & Assessment
Paula Jemson	Head of Corporate Parenting & Performance
Paul Rudd	Residential Care Service Manager
Rob Hamer	Futures for Families Service Manager
Bill Robinson	Children's Services Programme Manager
Jenny Rowan	Team Manager, Children's Care
Sam Turner	Policy & Participation Manager, Become
Vicky Davison-Boyd	Service Manager, Adoption Tees Valley

## BACKGROUND PAPERS

The following sources were used/referred to in the preparation of this report:-

Reports to, and minutes of, the Children & Young People's Social Care & Services Scrutiny Panel meetings: 14 September, 12 October, 9 November, 7 December 2020, 18 January, 15 February & 22 March 2021.

HM Government - Working Together to Safeguard Children (A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children) July 2018, updated December 2020.

HM Government – Working Together to Safeguard Children (Statutory Framework – legislation relevant to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children) July 2018.

Independent Review of Children's Social Care.

DfE Statistics for Children Looked After in England year end 31 March 2020.

Government Statistics - Fostering in England 2019/20 (main findings).

The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations: Vol. 2 – June 2015 – DfE.

Ofsted Inspection on Middlesbrough Children's Social Care Services 25/11/19 – 06/12/19 (published 24/01/20).

Sufficiency – Statutory Guidance on Securing Sufficient Accommodation for Looked After Children (March 2010).

PAUSE website and correspondence

Become Charity website & reports

### **COUNCILLOR D DAVISON CHAIR, CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE'S SOCIAL CARE & SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL**

**The Membership of the Panel: Councillors: T Mawston (Vice Chair), A Hellaoui, T Higgins, M Nugent, M Storey, Z Uddin, J Walker and G Wilson.**

**(During the course of the review, the Panel Membership was as follows: Councillors: L Garvey (Chair), C Dodds (Vice Chair), C Cooke, B Cooper, S Hill, M Saunders, Z Uddin, J Walker, G Wilson & C Wright).**

## **Children's Services – Supporting Children and Families**

All of the Services outlined below make up the support mechanisms within Children's Services to support children looked after, those on the edge of care, and their families.

### **Multi-Agency Children's Hub (MACH)**

The Multi-Agency Children's Hub (MACH) is the first point of contact for referrals regarding the welfare or safety of a child/young person. The experienced Social Work Team, headed up by a Team Manager and two Assistant Team Managers, works in conjunction with professionals from Health, Education and Police and other key agencies including CAMHS, Domestic Abuse Services and Missing Co-ordinators.

Each referral into the MACH is screened using the Threshold of Need document in order to determine whether further action is needed and, if so, where the referral should be directed.

Where the referral does not meet the Threshold of Need for statutory intervention, it is directed to the Early Help service. An Early Help Practitioner forms part of the multi-agency team within the MACH and will initially pick up referrals deemed as requiring Early Help. The Practitioner liaises with the relevant Early Help team and the case is allocated to a Practitioner within one of the teams who completes a 'My Family Plan' with the family.

Each member of the household is involved in completing the My Family Plan – including direct work with each child to establish how life is for them on a daily basis - and consideration is then given to decide which services should be engaged to help and support the family.

All professionals involved with the family then meet around every eight weeks to review progress, discuss any concerns and to ensure support is in place for the whole family. If it is felt that Early Help is not working and the family require additional support to that being offered, the family will be stepped up to the Assessment Service.

### **Assessment Service**

Cases allocated to the Assessment Service, or stepped up from Early Help, are prioritised and children within the household are seen within 24 hours where there is thought to be a child protection issue, or within 72 hours where there is thought to be Child in Need issue. A Single Assessment is undertaken, taking between 10 – 45 days depending upon the level of need. The purpose of the Single Assessment is to gather information and consider the needs of the child/young person and/or their family, to decide whether they require any support or whether they have been harmed, or are believed to be at risk of significant harm. The assessment needs to be carried out within 45 days from the point of referral and will generally require a social worker; During the assessment, everyone within the household is spoken to, including direct work undertaken with children.

Social Workers engage with children in an age-appropriate and variety of ways, including drawing, playing games, taking them to the park, to help put them at ease in order to gain an overview of daily life within the household. This is done over the course of several visits in order to build up a relationship with the child.

The Social Worker produces a genogram with the family showing their support network which might include extended family members, friends, etc. and sometimes a Family Group Conference (FGC) is held bringing

everyone together to look at ways they might be able to support the family. One of the issues highlighted in the Ofsted inspection findings was that more should be done to include 'absent fathers' in this process.

An individual assessment, including safety plans and Covid planning, is completed for each child and the Assessing Social Worker consults with other colleagues where appropriate, depending on need, to determine whether the child requires support from a specialist team, such as the Children with Disabilities Team.

Once the single assessment is complete, the Social Worker makes a recommendation as to which service is best placed to support the family. The outcomes from the Single Assessment could be:

- The child is deemed not to be 'In Need', therefore no further action will be taken, other than to provide advice regarding universal services that are available OR, a referral to Early Help
- The child (or children) within the household is deemed to be 'In Need' but is not suffering, or considered likely to suffer, significant harm. In this case, Children's Services will draw up a 'Child In Need' plan with the family, to identify the support they require
- The child (or children) within the household is deemed to be 'In Need' and there are concerns that the child is suffering, or considered likely to suffer, significant harm. In such cases, Children's Services will hold a multi-agency Strategy Discussion to determine whether a child protection investigation (section 47 enquiry) is needed; and consider whether any immediate protection is also required to ensure that the child/young person is safe; for example there are occasions that a child/young person may need to move to live with another family member on a temporary basis or become looked after by the Local Authority.

Where it is decided that a child requires continued involvement with Children's Care, the case is then transferred to one of the Safeguarding and Care Planning Teams (either Child in Need or Child Protection Teams).

### Safeguarding and Care Planning

Where a single assessment concludes that further work is required around safeguarding, the case would transition to the Safeguarding and Care Planning Service.

Where child protection concerns are identified, a multi-agency Child Protection Conference is held and the child/children are made subject to a Child Protection Plan. The Plan is in respect of each individual child and focuses on each child's day to day life. Improvement is measured and monitored within set timescales with regular reviews.

In some instances it will be considered necessary to step up cases to a Public Law Outline (PLO) legal framework meeting to consider the local authority's duties when thinking about taking a case to Court to obtain a Care Order in respect of a child. This is used for long term fostering, residential care, etc. The Team works with the family to avoid care proceedings, however, if the children are unable to remain safe in the care of the parents, the authority examines whether they could live safely with another family member or friend, known as a connected persons placement, or with foster carers.

### Looked After Children and Corporate Parenting

When a decision is made to remove a child/children from the birth family, the Looked After Children and Corporate Parenting service endeavour to identify forever homes for the child/children that will meet their needs on a long term basis. At this stage in the process, all decision making is required to be extremely thorough, with robust assessments.

Accommodating children in their forever homes can be achieved in a number of ways including:-

- Connected Persons carers (extended family members or close friends);
- Special Guardians;
- Long Term Foster Carers;
- Long Term residential provision. (This is not a preferred option and is only used where a child has very complex needs).
- Adoption.

The Looked After Children and Corporate Parenting Team works closely with the children and birth parents and considers whether it is appropriate for all the children within the household to be placed together or individually. It is always preferable to keep siblings together unless there is a justified reason for separating them and it is deemed not to be in the children's best interests to be placed together. It is essential for the Looked After Children Team to physically see children on a regular basis and to see them alone to undertake direct work with them. This helps build stable relationships with professionals in order for them to protect children and promote their welfare. The child's Social Worker should always promote independent advocacy for the children which is particularly important for older children.

The Team works closely with the Independent Reviewing Officer and CAFCASS (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service) who provide support to the children and birth parents throughout care proceedings. The child's Social Worker will make a recommendation in relation to the plan for the child/children but it is the Court that makes the final decision.

Care planning needs to be timely and robust and the Independent Reviewing Officer has an important role to play.

The Team is responsible for finding permanent ('forever homes') for children and young people. Prospective carers are carefully assessed in a timely way with a suitable match being made as swiftly as possible.

In its 2019 inspection findings, Ofsted identified that children had not been moved to their forever homes quickly enough and that there had been delays particularly in the Safeguarding and Care Planning Service and improvement work is ongoing in this area.

#### Residential, Fostering and Futures for Families

In some scenarios, a young person may be referred to Middlesbrough's new service, Futures for Families, prior to becoming looked after. Futures for Families was launched in August 2020 and is an edge of care service working with young people to prevent them from being taken into care. The Department for Education (DfE) provided funding for Middlesbrough to develop the service, based on North Yorkshire's 'No Wrong Door' model. It provides a whole system approach with a multi-agency team and a residential component to support young people and their families.

In some instances, a child's needs are best met with residential provision. Middlesbrough has some in-house residential provision, however, this must often be purchased from a private sector provider.

Middlesbrough's in-house residential provision, includes a respite offer at Gleneagles for children with disabilities.

Where it is decided that a child's care plan is for fostering, careful matching with appropriate foster carers takes place.

Middlesbrough foster carers undergo a rigorous assessment process prior to their application being submitted to the Family Placement Panel where a recommendation is subsequently made regarding their suitability. The Panel's recommendation is put forward to the Agency Decision Maker, in this case the Director of Children's Care, for a final decision as to whether the prospective carers have been successful. Carers can be approved to care for varying numbers and age ranges of children depending on the carer's circumstances, for example the provision of short term care, long term care (up to age 18 and beyond), respite care, specialist provision such as mother and baby placements, or specialising in moving children on to adoptive placements which is a very valuable resource.

#### Youth Offending Service/Vulnerable, Exploited, Missing, Trafficked (VEMT)

The YOS/VEMT service may become involved with families and/or liaise with the Teams described above, where a child/young person is known to be frequently missing from home or where the child/young person has been arrested.

The South Tees Youth Offending Service is a multi-agency partnership serving both Middlesbrough and Redcar and Cleveland local authority areas. The service is made up of professionals from both Middlesbrough and Redcar and Cleveland's Children's Services, Public Health, Cleveland Police and the National Probation Service.

Where a young person has been arrested, they are brought to the attention of the Youth Offending Service. A separate assessment is undertaken in respect of the young person - the outcome of which will determine the help that is subsequently offered.

The Youth Offending Service works closely with Children's Social Care and follows joint procedures and assessments.

The Service receives daily information from the Police in relation to young people who are missing and each is given a risk management rating of low, medium or high. A 'Missing' Team Manager is located within the MACH and screens cases received into the MACH on a daily basis alongside the Early Help Practitioner.

Every missing young person is offered a Return Home interview which is shared with the child's Social Worker and aims to build up a picture around the young person. Where a young person is repeatedly missing, this is discussed at the VEMT multi-agency Forum, which examines issues around exploitation and shares information with partners. Additional support is provided where appropriate. Children who are missing from education are also discussed at VEMT.

Those young people in VEMT that are deemed to be very high risk, and where professionals feel that concerns need to be escalated to Director level, are assessed and considered by the Risk Management Group. This group is chaired by the Executive Director of Children's Services and considers those young people where very significant concerns exist and those considered to be at high risk of death. The Executive Director takes responsibility for the young people being discussed at this group and they are invited to attend to give their views as to whether they agree that they should be discussed at such a high level and to tell the group about the issues they face.

## SEND/Children with Disabilities

The SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) Service provides appropriate support to ensure improved outcomes for young people aged 0-25 with special educational needs and those regarded as vulnerable learners, within the statutory framework.

The SEND Assessment Team identifies, assesses and makes provision for children and young people 0-25 with SEND via the Education, Health and Care assessment process as young people progress towards adulthood. The Team also carries out annual reviews of Statements of SEN and EHCPs (Education Health and Care Plan) and provides advice and support to professionals and settings regarding support required for children and young people.

### Access to Education

Access to Education encompasses several teams including the Virtual School, School Exclusions and Children Missing from Education.

The Officers within these teams examine issues carefully on a continual basis in conjunction with all schools, including senior leaders, SENCOs, designated teachers and safeguarding leads. Communication between professionals takes place daily in order to pool intelligence on children. Where children are permanently excluded from school the team ensures that legal processes are followed correctly and that schools are compliant.

Where children and/or families went missing, the Team worked with the Police, Home Office and Benefit Agencies to track them down, although it can be difficult to track families who have returned to a foreign country.

### Virtual School

The Virtual School is made up of a team of professionals who work closely with carers, parents, schools, social workers and other agencies to help ensure children looked after achieve the best outcomes possible at school.

The team track and monitor attendance, achievement, progress and outcomes, and provide various support and interventions when a child looked after experiences problems at school or falls behind with their learning.

The Virtual School has a team of Personal Education Plan Advisors who work closely with staff in all of the schools which children looked after attend to ensure that they each have a Personal Education Plan (PEP) which is of high quality and can be used by all professionals and agencies involved with the child to provide bespoke support. PEPs are reviewed each school term and updated where appropriate.

The team provides advice, guidance and information for all of those involved in the education and progress of children looked after, as well as delivering an extensive programme of training to help upskill stakeholders. Advice and guidance is also provided to parents of previously looked after children.

The Virtual School also plans and helps children looked after to make the transition from nursery to primary school and from primary to secondary education.



## Community Learning

Middlesbrough Community Learning provides learning opportunities for people of all ages and abilities. This includes a wide-ranging offer of traineeships and apprenticeships, starting at 16 plus, as well as a programme of adult education through the adult skills budget.

For those who are not in full time employment, education or training, Middlesbrough Community Learning can provide support across a range of options including apprenticeships and training.

Apprenticeships are available from the age of 16 and are delivered in a variety of vocations from Levels 2 to 5, such as business administration, customer service, public service, operational service and supporting teaching and learning in schools.

Additional support is provided with the apprenticeship programme to those young people who are looked after, or care leavers. At the recruitment stage, once an application was received for the chosen apprenticeship, a young person identified as being looked after/care leaver, is guaranteed an interview providing they met the entry criteria.

Should their application for their chosen apprenticeship programme be unsuccessful, further support is provided via the Youth Employment Team through the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI), accessible to young people aged 16-29. An advisor is assigned to the young person providing practical support, such as help with completing applications and building self-confidence for interviews and providing advice to explore other options available. This might include an offer of work experience through the 50 Futures programme if required.

Once the young person commences their apprenticeship, a learning mentor is assigned to them and remains with them throughout their apprenticeship, providing additional support to encourage and build confidence, learn new skills and offer financial advice.

For adults aged 30 and over with multiple barriers into work, support is provided through the Routes to Work Programme.

## **PAUSE - Report for Scrutiny Panel (Middlesbrough) July 2021**

### **Summary and operational updates**

The contract started on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020, however Middlesbrough came into the contract a little later.

We have a Data Sharing Agreement in place with Middlesbrough and we take all of the initial referrals from Scoping data gathered by Pause National. **162** women were considered eligible for the Pause service in Middlesbrough.

Middlesbrough sent the details of **18** women they considered most at risk of repeat pregnancies that would likely lead to children being removed from their care on 18<sup>th</sup> August 2020. We are commissioned to work with **10** women in Middlesbrough.

Out of those **18** women; **9 women are open** on the program and **1 is engaging**. She regularly meets with the practitioner and is being given the full offer, we hope she will be open in the next couple of weeks. We have also received a number of referrals directly from children's social Worker's following final hearings.

#### **Closed without being open;**

**5** women declined the service or there was not enough information to track the women down and offer the service, **6** of the women were not eligible to work with Pause due to no risk of pregnancy (sterilisation 1), **2** had children in their care, **1** still in court proceedings, **1** moved out of area. **1** of the women had too complex mental health difficulties to be able to consent to the Pause program.

**5** women that declined the Pause service were engaging for some time and were offered supports and referrals into other services for a period of 3 months.

#### **Engaging but never opened**

**1** woman was in an abusive relationship, the practitioner continued to attend her property and felt although the woman declined the service, she continued answering the door, accepted care packages. The woman was then supported to flee an abusive relationship and moved to a women's refuge in York. As such she is out of area, but built a trusting relationship with the practitioner and managed to get to safety. She reported that she looked forward to their short door step interactions and gave the woman hope that things could be different, but she could never talk openly as her abusive partner was in the home.

Once women are open on the program we have had **0% drop out rate**.

Women have consistently chosen to focus on **(1) Relationship with my children, (2) housing** and **(3) physical and mental health** as their top priorities.

The **10** women on the programme have had a total of **28** children removed from their care (an average of 3 children per woman). The women range in **age from 23 to 41 years old**, with an average age of **28 years**. **22%** of the women have **care experience**.

## Partnerships

We continue to build partnerships with **Virgin Care Sexual Health Services**. There has been a slow start with women waiting 3 or 4 weeks for telephone triage appointments and a further 3-4 weeks to be able to gain contraception. We now have a pathway for women to be seen the next day. We are hoping to hold a group for Pause women with a sexual health nurse discussion around STD/STI's general sexual health and how to safely use home testing kits.

We have made positive links with **IMPACT on Teeside** and are looking at starting a bespoke **grief and loss group** for women that are on the Pause Program and this starts in August 2021.

Next month we are presenting to **Adoption Tees Valley** and Middlesbrough **Adult Safeguarding** following some frontline partnership working.

We have also made links with **My Sisters Place**.

## Group work and creativity

We have been on day trips since the easing of lock down to **Redcar beach and Beamish**, with women from all over the North East.

We run a virtual drop in session where we have ran **healthy cooking sessions on a budget**, crafts groups with a link made with MIMA.

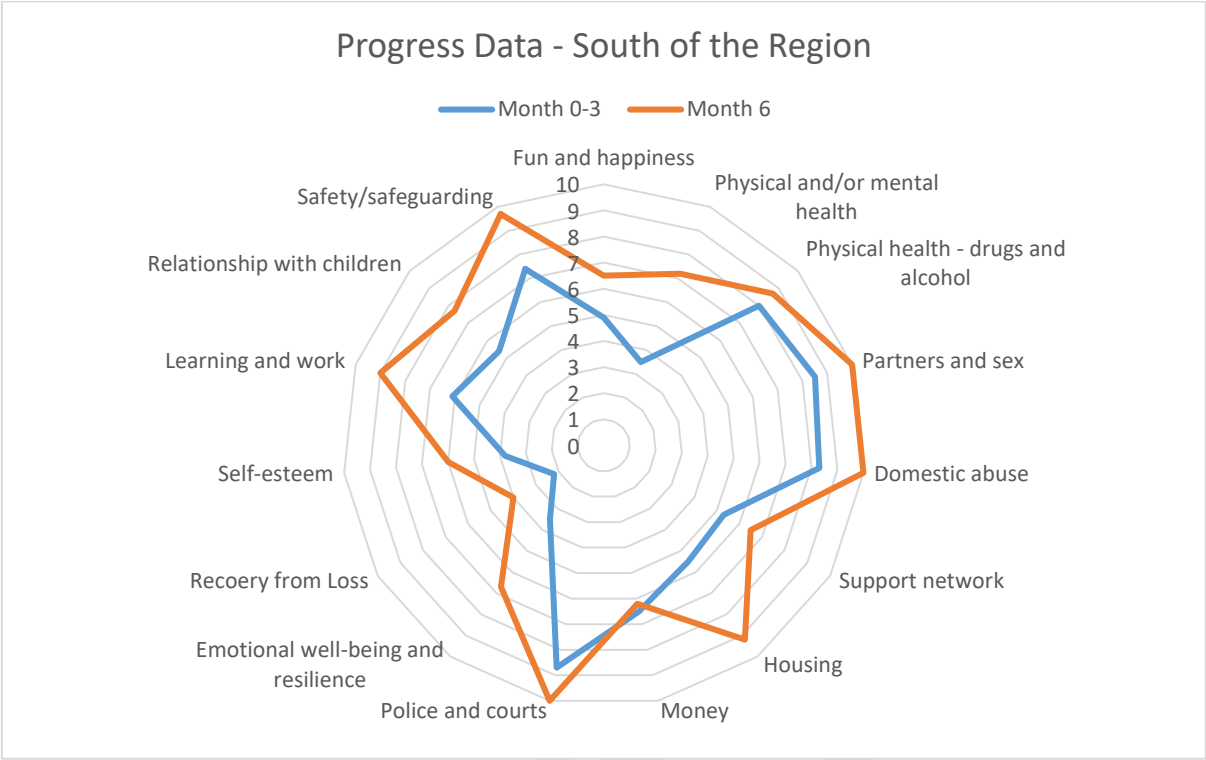
Groups really help with **self-esteem building**, **reduced social isolation**, **managing loss** through reducing the stigma of child removal through peer support and shared experience, role modelling positive behaviours and trying new things.

We have worked in collaboration with Digital Me for the women to create **a film** displaying a song that was written by Pause women during a **Music Therapy one to one and group** facilitated through Pause. This also includes women's art work, poetry and interviews about their experiences of services and working with Pause, explain the way in which they would like to be supported by services to recover from past and present traumas. They have created a podcast through music therapy about the woman's journey and writing songs about working with Pause, domestic abuse and the loss of her children,

We have also been working with **Open Clasp Theatre company** and the women have co-written a play to explore the complexities, challenges and successes in relationship between women that have had their children removed from their care and social workers. They are holding auditions for this in July 2021.

## Outcomes;

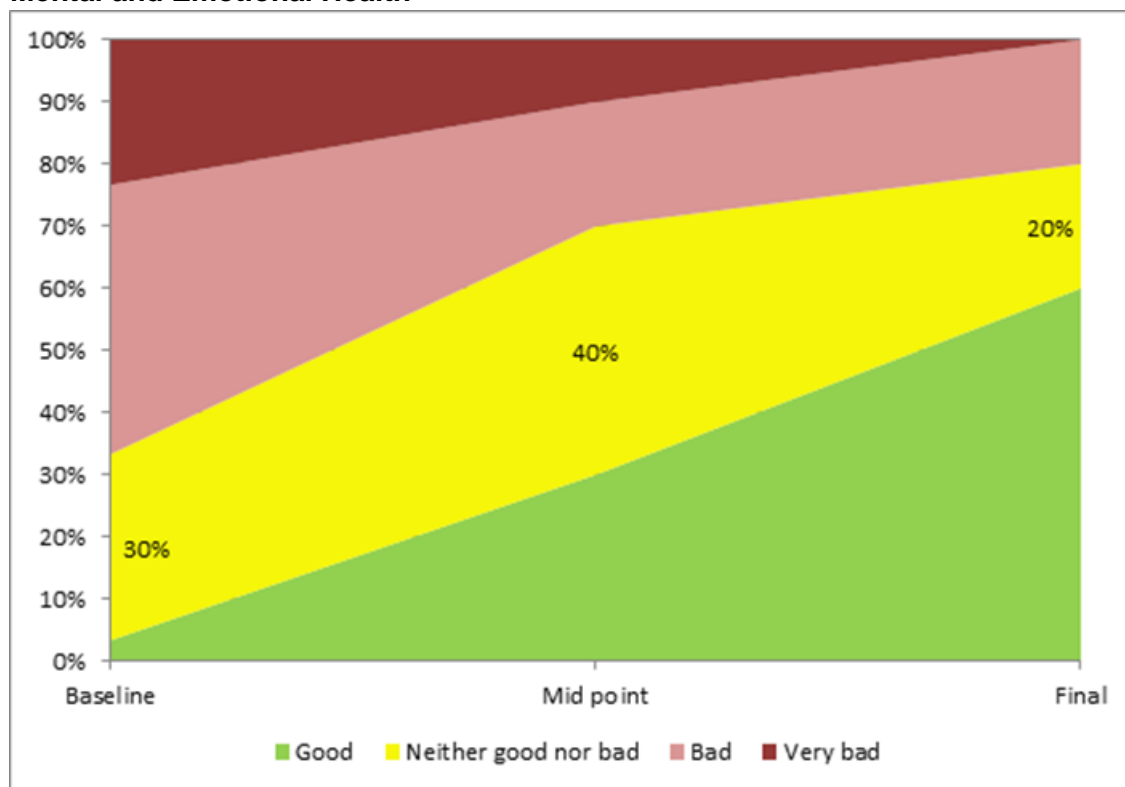
The radar chart shows how **17 women** working with Pause North East (Stockton, Redcar and Cleveland and Middlesbrough) have self-reported on a range of areas such through scaling questions (where 1 is the lowest score possible and 10 is the highest). We use the women's self-report on relationship with children as a proxy measure for how our work affects children.



Outcomes for women and children: Mental health

Women’s mental health outcomes looks at CORE 10 scores and answers to the assessment question; ‘*How would you describe your mental and emotional health?*’

## Mental and Emotional Health



1.

Row Labels	Baseline	Mid point	Final
Good	3%	30%	60%
Neither good nor bad	30%	40%	20%
Bad	43%	20%	20%
Very bad	23%	10%	0%