

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| Report of: | Deputy Mayor and Executive Member for Children's Services Executive Director of Children's Services |
|-------------------|--|

| | |
|----------------------|-----------|
| Submitted to: | Executive |
|----------------------|-----------|

| | |
|--------------|--------------|
| Date: | 14 June 2022 |
|--------------|--------------|

| | |
|---------------|--|
| Title: | Children's Services Improvement Programme: Update Report |
|---------------|--|

| | |
|--------------------|-------------|
| Report for: | Information |
|--------------------|-------------|

| | |
|----------------|--------|
| Status: | Public |
|----------------|--------|

| | |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Strategic priority: | Children and young people |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|

| | |
|----------------------|----|
| Key decision: | No |
|----------------------|----|

| | |
|-------------|--------------------------------|
| Why: | Report is for information only |
|-------------|--------------------------------|

| | |
|----------------|----|
| Urgent: | No |
|----------------|----|

| | |
|-------------|-----|
| Why: | N/A |
|-------------|-----|

Executive summary

In summary, this report :-

- Notes the process for monitoring the Children's Services Improvement Plan which is by reporting to the Multi-Agency Children's Services Improvement Board
- Sets out the findings from the most recent Ofsted Monitoring Visit to Children's Services on 29th and 30th March. The feedback letter noted significant improvements in social care practice in relation to permanency, moving children on to their forever homes in as timely a way as possible.
- Describes the likely timings and topics for future Ofsted monitoring and inspection. We will receive two more monitoring visits with a full inspection at the end of 2022 or early 2023.

- Notes the main risks in delivering against the Improvement Plan namely the recruitment of permanent experienced social workers and maintaining the pace of improvement in the light of current financial restraints.
- Update members on the progress being made to show Middlesbrough Children that they matter namely the success of the Young Researchers' survey in gaining the views of children and young people across the town to inform future planning and the Middlesbrough Children Matter Conference being held on 13th July 2022.

Purpose

1. To brief members of the Executive on the progress made against the Children's Services Improvement Plan with particular reference to the findings of Ofsted's Monitoring Visit on 29th/30th March 2022.
2. To evidence progress against the Middlesbrough Children Matter agenda.

Background and relevant information

3. The Children's Services Improvement Plan is monitored on a six weekly basis at the Multi-Agency Children's Strategic Improvement Board chaired by independent person John Pearce the highly respected Director of Children's Services in Durham. He is also vice-president of the Association of Directors of Children's Services. Positive progress is noted and recorded in the board's minutes. Attendees include the Lead Member for Children's Services, Cllr Mieka Smiles. The plan is refreshed after every Ofsted Monitoring Visit.
4. Ofsted undertook a Monitoring Visit to Children's Services on 29th/30th March focusing on matching, placement and decision-making for Children in care, for whom members are Corporate Parents, and planning and achieving permanence (forever homes) for children. The letter reporting on their findings, which were general very positive was published on 6th May 2022. A brief overview of the finding is as follows:
5. Children's Services 'knows itself' through a detailed improvement plan and an accurate Self-Assessment. Ofsted described the latter as 'Spot On'. This is particularly pleasing because this was assessed as not being the case in the last full inspection of Children's Services in November/December 2019. If a service knows itself then it is much better placed to know what to do to make the necessary improvements to improve outcomes for children.
6. We now have a systemic framework for permanency planning that is less reactive and more forward looking, ensuring that children are living in their 'forever homes' in as timely a way as possible. Plans for permanency for children now include parallel planning to avoid drift and delay and a monthly Permanence Planning Group meeting tracks progression towards permanence. Notably social workers know that children need permanence and know what they need to do to achieve it for the children with whom they are working and are receiving high quality supervision that actively contributes to early permanence planning.

7. Other positives include most social workers know their children well and have built trusting relationships with them supported by good quality direct work with them. Children's voices are informing their planning and they benefit from spending safely assessed family time with their birth family members. Children are brought into care in a more timely way and both Her Honour Judge Matthews QC and the Child and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) were positive about the improvements made to social work practice. Social workers write directly to children in records for example saying 'Joe I first met you when you were only six weeks old', rather than saying 'I first met Joe when he was six weeks old'. This is a powerful way of keeping the focus on the child at all times. Social workers understand the need for children to have life story work completed with them and for them so they understand their parentage and identity as they grow up and children when children look at the records in the future they will be able to see the thought and planning that went into moving them into their forever homes.
8. Children also experience less delay because Care Planning meetings, supervision sessions and children's reviews are reflective and well recorded session providing clear oversight of their plans and actions.
9. Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) have improved oversight of children's individual plans and there is evidence of IROs reviewing the work with children midway between the formal reviews of these plans.
10. There are however, still areas that require constant consideration by the service. Unfortunately there is still some impact on children from a legacy of absent or poor planning. Some children have experienced earlier, unplanned placement moves and therefore disruption and instability and in addition some children are living with family members who have not been assessed and approved as Family and Friends foster carers and a minority of children with complex needs are living in unregistered children's homes awaiting a suitably matched regulated placement because despite national searches it has not been possible to source a regulated placement. However, Ofsted is clear that senior leaders are aware of these children and all have individual assessments and cumulative oversight to mitigate against risk. As an example of this the Director of Children's Care meets with an Ofsted inspector on a six-weekly basis to seek their advice and discuss any risks to these children and mitigating actions. These children's situations are also raised with the Executive Director of Children's Services on a regular basis.
11. I am extremely pleased to report that social workers spoke positively about the determined efforts to make improvements and create the conditions for good social work practice through clear expectations and standards and value the support from their team members, the availability and quality of the training and development offer and the growing supporting working culture.
12. Ofsted are due to return for their next Monitoring Visit in July 2022 and the plan is for the focus to revisit our Early Help Service, the Multi-Agency Children's Hub (MACH) the front door to Children's Services and the Assessment Service. The last visit to these services took place in Nov 2020 so Ofsted will be looking for both sustained improvements as well as new ones where appropriate. The final monitoring visit is likely to be in the autumn with a focus on longer term looked after children and Care Leavers. The full inspection is expected at the end of 2022 or early 2023.
13. Representatives from the Department of Education (DfE) namely Sam Morrison, our Improvement Case Lead and Stuart Smith our Improvement Adviser carried out the first

part of a DfE review on 17th May meeting with groups of front line staff and their managers. At the time of writing their report has not yet been received however both Sam and Stuart report positive comments from both groups with the possible exception of social workers' salary in Middlesbrough as compared with the rest of the region. However, Middlesbrough has recently implemented a £5,000 'Welcome Aboard' payment which take the total payment to the level of other authorities and we already have a retention payment. Some 'myth busting' work is needed to ensure that these offers are taken into account when salary levels are discussed both in-house and externally.

14. The date for the second part of the review has not yet been decided but will involve meeting with senior officers and members closely involved in the Improvement Process.
15. The most significant risks to continued improvement and delivering against the Children's Services Improvement Plan are:-
16. The challenge of recruiting permanent experienced social work staff. Currently 26% of social work staff are agency workers with the resulting additional staffing costs, however 52% of these staff have been working with us in Middlesbrough for over one year. This in itself brings some stability into the workforce and mitigates against changes of social workers for children.
17. Maintaining the pace of improvement despite financial constraints for example continuing to fund the Practice Leads and colleagues from Audit to Excellence.
18. The focus on 'Middlesbrough Children Matter' (MCM) continues to grow. A cohort of 'Young Researchers' recruited and supported by Participation People a service commissioned to develop and support the influence of Middlesbrough's children's voices on the future of the town carried out a survey which has received over 2,200 response. These responses are being collated and the aim is that they will be used to inform future planning.
19. A MCM conference to inform work across the council and in the wider partnership working with Middlesbrough's children, is planned for 13th July. Some nationally known speakers have already confirmed their attendance. All members are respectfully invited to attend.

What decision(s) are being recommended?

That the Executive notes

- The progress made to improve outcomes for Middlesbrough's vulnerable children as set out in our Children's Services Improvement plan 2020/2023
- The effect of this work on Children's Services' mission namely 'Our Mission to Show Middlesbrough Children that they Matter.'

Rationale for the recommended decision(s)

20. Although a decision is not required if Children's Services does not make the required improvements as set out in the Children's Services Improvement Plan at pace we will not improve life chances for Middlesbrough's vulnerable children and increase our Ofsted judgement from our current 'Inadequate' status.

Other potential decision(s) and why these have not been recommended

21. It is not appropriate to retain the status quo as Children's Services would not be meeting the needs of Middlesbrough's most vulnerable children.

Impact(s) of the recommended decision(s)

Legal

There are no legal implications given that the report is for information only.

22.

Strategic priorities and risks

23. This report relates directly to strategic priority CYP 05 – consolidate and build on recent Children's Services progress to improve Ofsted rating.

Human Rights, Equality and Data Protection

24. Improving the quality of practice in Children's Services will also improve compliance and practice with regards to Human Rights, Equality and Data Protection.

Financial

25. As reported previously, Children's Social Care remains the biggest area of financial concern for the Council. The Council has an Ofsted Improvement Plan in place, and the financial situation is being closely monitored jointly by the Service and Finance, and a three year plan has been drawn up to ascertain the estimated outturn position for the current and future financial years and therefore the potential MTFP impact.

26. Additional funding totalling over £3.3m has been provided in the MTFP to Children's Services from 2024/25 to support this. In the Revenue Budget, Council Tax, Medium Term Financial Plan, and Capital Strategy 2022/23 report to Council in February 2022, £300,000 was provided earlier in 2022/23 in order to enable some initial permanency of staff supporting the improvement journey, therefore this means the remaining £3m will be provided from 2024/25.

27. This will mean that the Ofsted Improvement Plan will be properly funded in the medium term. This will be closely monitored in real time and any amendments required to the level of funding provided will be made as appropriate in line with governance arrangements.

28. The Revenue and Capital Budget – Year-End Outturn position 2021/22 report to Executive on 14 June 2022 highlights that Children's Social Care overspent by £8.295m in 2021/22. If the financial plan is met this will mean that there will be approximately a £6m reduction in expenditure per annum by 2024/25.

29. As reported previously, in line with national trends, Children's Social Care continues to be an area of financial pressure to the Council. The costs of these pressures in respect of increased level of need in relation to children in care and the increase in the cost of

providing care is constantly being monitored. The recruitment of permanent social work staff is a major challenge to the Council, with the continued reliance on the use of significant levels of agency staff being a significant risk to the long-term finances of the Council.

30. Whilst the Local Government Finance Settlement in 2022/23 provided additional funding for Social Care there is still a significant risk of additional increased level of need in relation to children in care and the increases in the cost of providing care and that in the event of this, sufficient additional Government funding is not provided to mitigate this. Along with funding uncertainty, the continued pressure of demands on Children's Social Care is the most significant financial risk to the Council.



31. Further Children's Social Care demand increases and any delays to the implementation of the Council's Ofsted Improvement Plan continue to be a major potential risk to the Council and this is being constantly monitored, and further updates will be provided in future quarterly budget monitoring reports to Executive.

Actions to be taken to implement the recommended decision(s)

| Action | Responsible Officer | Deadline |
|--|---------------------|------------|
| Implementing the Children's Services' Improvement Plan | Sue Butcher | March 2023 |
| See Children's Strategic Priority CYP05 | Sue Butcher | March 2023 |

Appendices - None

Background papers

| Body | Report title | Date |
|------------------------|--|--|
| Para 3 (first mention) | Children's Services Improvement Plan  Improvement Plan 04.05.2022.xlsx | As reported to the Multi-Agency Strategic Improvement Board on 23 rd May 2022 |
| Para 4 (first mention) | Ofsted Monitoring Visit letter  10207003 Middlesbrough Monit | 6 th May 2022 |

Contacts:

- Sue Butcher, Executive Director of Children's Services
- Rachel Farnham, Director of Children's Social Care

Email addresses:

- Sue_Butcher@middlesbrough.gov.uk
- Rachel_Farnham@middlesbrough.gov.uk