

## **EXECUTIVE MEMBER REPORT TO COUNCIL**

**EXECUTIVE MEMBER: CHILDREN'S SERVICES: COUNCILLOR ZAFAR UDDIN**

**DATE OF MEETING: 27.03.2024**

**The purpose of this report is to provide an update to members on areas of activity within my portfolio including performance against strategic priorities.**

### **STRATEGIC PRIORITIES AND UPDATES:**

**We will show Middlesbrough's children that they matter and work to make our town safe and welcoming and to improve outcomes for all children and young people.**

#### **➤ Early Help Service (Stronger Families)**

1. Stronger Families is designed to prevent escalation of need and risk and is underpinned by a multi-agency Early Help Strategy and the Family Help Board, which has heled to expand the early help offer in Middlesbrough. We work with organisations and agencies to develop joined-up early help services. Our Family Hubs now provide a single access point, a 'front door' to universal and early help services for families, with co-located services to make it easier for families to access the services they need, including Start for Life services, outreach support and virtual offers.
2. Many early help services offered in the Family Hubs are for families who do not need intensive, whole-family Lead Practitioner support; however, the hubs ensure seamless access to more targeted support where needed. This includes skilled Family Practitioners in the Stronger Families Service who provide interventions for more complex families. Family Practitioners undertake child-focused assessments which focus on families' strengths, alongside any worries and concerns. Direct work routinely takes place with children, and this helps to ensure that their views inform decisions about next steps.
3. Our Stronger Families Service has benefited from a stable and experienced workforce with little turnover. The Family Practitioners and Team Managers have a range of different skills, professional backgrounds and experience including domestic abuse workers, early year's practitioners, teachers, police officers, youth workers and DWP employment advisers. Caseload averages for Feb 2024 are 26 children. There are currently 880 (Feb 2024) children and young people supported

by Stronger Families and a further 1245 supported by our partners through early help interventions.

➤ **Young People Not in Education Employment and Training (NEET)**

4. The Early Help service performs all LA statutory duties linked to participation of young people to ensure that young people receive their entitled offer of a suitable place in education or training, under the 'September Guarantee'. We have a team of specialist staff who work with young people who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) or whose current activity is not known. The Middlesbrough proportional NEET rate is about to be submitted to the Department of Education for 2023/2024 and is currently comparing positively, against regional, national, and statistical neighbour comparisons, this means that we know the destinations of our young people and we can focus support on those who are not participating in learning.

➤ **Multi-Agency Children's Hub (MACH) and Assessment**

5. The MACH Team Manager is fully staffed currently. We continue to strengthen our Multi Agency Partnerships and are facilitating Multi Agency Audit. We have held a practice week which commenced 26/27 February 2024. This has included dip sampling of contacts within the MACH, observations of the daily triage meeting and observations of strategy discussions which will help to strengthen the service.
6. The team have completed some peer audit and reflective discussion around recording and strengthening practice. Weekly Audit is continuing with MA Partners. The Team has regular Team meetings to look at team development, improvement, and stability. Bimonthly MACH strategic Board is held with key partners to support improve and develop multi-Agency working and Operational MACH meetings also take place Bi-Monthly.
7. The Assessment Team have continued to be a relatively stable staff team and although there remain some agency workers in place, there is current recruitment out to advert to replace the current agency workers with permanent members of staff. We have commenced our practice week within the assessment service where our dip sample audit will review management oversight, quality of visits assessments and planning in order for us to strengthen and develop our service. We will be reviewing our direct work with our children to look at strengths and Areas of development. Our performance data continues to improve with regular high support and challenge within supervision and management oversight. Weekly performance is reviewed by Team Managers and the service manager.

➤ **Learning, Review and Development**

8. Following recent recruitment activity, the Review and Development unit now have a full complement of Independent Reviewing Officers, which should see improvement in conference and review timeliness for our children and young people. We have also appointed to the Social Work Academy Team Manager post and are looking forward to strengthening our support offer for AYSE/NQSW and Frontline staff.
9. Group audits have been offered to all our Team Managers this month as we move towards improving our audit quality. This is scheduled to continue to be offered

every month following positive engagement and feedback. Further to this we have an exciting schedule planned for Social Work Practice week, including training and development sessions with our Islington 'Partners in Practice' alongside wellbeing sessions. Weekly Reflective forums are being organised to support practitioners as they explore good practice and areas for development in their work, and the new monthly PSW newsletter is scheduled to be circulated this week, providing a regular vehicle for sharing good practice, training and development opportunities and seeking staff views and engagement.

➤ **Safeguarding & Care Planning, Children with Disabilities, Aspire and Pre-birth Team.**

10. Since last update the pre-birth team is now part of the safeguarding and care planning service. The safeguarding service continues to be busy with a high number of care proceedings and children subject of child protection plans. The introduction of child protection panel and child in need panel has provided extra scrutiny. This means children's cases are escalated and deescalated appropriately. The overall caseloads for social workers in the safeguarding teams has decreased with the average caseload being about 22 cases.

11. Reflecting the picture in neighbouring local authorities, the recruitment of experienced social workers is challenging. The safeguarding service has 25 vacancies for social workers, 17 of these vacancies are covered by agency social workers and there are 8 vacancies that are not covered. To address this the service has started to plan a recruitment day for social workers across the wider service. Prior to the innovate team service's contract expiring, we will need to recruit social workers for the currently unstaffed team 3.

➤ **Children Looked After (CLA)**

12. Staffing recruitment and retention continues to be a factor within the CLA service, the volume of SW churn is significantly impacting on the quality of planning for children and YP within the service. A risk mitigation plan was created following the departure of the previous HOS. Tracy Jeffs who is an experience HOS, was recently appointed as interim Head of Service and will be taking on the role across CLA, Pathway and Leaving care.

**HIGHLIGHTS: Please see below**

➤ **Increased Residential and Supported Accommodation for Children in Care and Care Leavers.**

13. The Meeting of Executive, on Wednesday 28th February 2024 Noted, the reasons why the original plan could not be delivered and its removal from the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP). And approved the revised approach which is built into the proposed 2024/25 budget and MTFP 2024/25 to 2026/27. Executive also noted further savings that will be incorporated into future MTFP periods. (Item 23/78)

**14.** The Children's Services Financial Improvement plan approved in February 2023 included elements of increasing the in-house estate for Children's care. During the course of the 12 months significant efforts were made to identify suitable properties to bring online. These efforts were hampered for two key reasons:

1. At the commencement of the year significant time was spent exploring a large property which could have met the needs of our 16+ cohort. Months exploring this including the refurbishment feasibility were undertaken, however it transpired there were issues with the refurbishment and build that had already been undertaken which would have left a legal liability on the local authority to resolve. The focus on this area led to a delay in project achievements.

2. The cost of refurbishment, when seeking to convert any existing council asset to a residential home were prohibitive and did not represent value for money. This had therefore led to a strategy for future consideration being the identification of suitable properties with minimal renovation work required.

Under the revised plan, Middlesbrough Council would reduce the use of the external high-cost placements and grow the residential and supported accommodation offer, by increasing Middlesbrough Council's in house offer and building partnerships with commissioned providers.

For further details please see the copy of the minutes of the above meeting on the council website/modern.Gov.

*Anything you wish to highlight – good work/best practice/good news stories,*

**THE TIME AHEAD: Please see below.**

- I am in discussion with Wendy Kelly, Lead for Children, and young people's Emotional Well-being. HeadStart Service Manager, to look at and discuss a way forward to have an engagement, in proactively work with mental health professionals in order to meet with the needs of the young people who are affected by the mental health issues.
- I am exploring the opportunities to work with other Neighbouring Authorities in terms of sharing good practices and supporting each other in relevant issues i.e., Training, Development and Policy Guidance and the best value services.
- I am also exploring re the Equality and Diversity aspects of the relevant issues within the workforce by liaising with HR Department.

*Upcoming issues/things on the FWP/projects involved in*  
See above.

NAME: Cllr Zafar Uddin

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