

EXECUTIVE MEMBER REPORT TO COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: CHILDREN'S SERVICES - COUNCILLOR ZAFAR UDDIN

DATE OF MEETING: 17 JULY 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:

Strategic Priority: *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:**

1. Early Help Service (Stronger Families)

A new Family Help Strategy (2024 – 2027) has been developed and launched in June, in collaboration with key early help partner agencies. This sets out the actions we are taking as a partnership to ensure that we have robust and effective Family Help arrangements in place for children, young people, and their families across all communities and aims to support families at the earliest opportunity and prevent escalation to statutory services.

2. Middlesbrough has adopted Family Hubs as the model of delivery with the Family Hubs providing a single access point, a 'front door' to co-located services to make it easier for families to access the help they need. This includes Start for Life services, outreach support and virtual offers from pre-birth to 19 years, and 25 years for children and young people with SEND. The support we provide to families fits together with the targeted family help delivered by the Stronger Families Service and other specialist services. The Stronger Families Service remains stable and is performing well, supporting 877 children (May 2024) through whole family working and early help interventions.

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

3. The Early Help service performs all LA statutory duties linked to participation of young people, and we have a small 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. We are performing well against all key measures and Middlesbrough has been identified by the Department for Education (DfE) as a 'top performer' regarding the participation of young people in education, training, and employment opportunities. The DCS and Head of Service for Early Help were recently invited to meet with DfE representatives to share good practice with other LAs.

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

4. The MACH Team is fully staffed with permanent workers currently. There continues to be strengthening of our Multi Agency Partnerships and we continue to facilitate Multi Agency Audit monthly. We have held our second practice week which commenced 03 June 2024. This has included dip sampling of contacts within the MACH, observations of business support and screening by the social workers and observations of the daily triage meeting and Strategy meetings we are developing a plan to further strengthen the service. As part of the practice week, we have completed a case study with the whole team and 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. We continually scrutinise our practice to ensure that we know ourselves and look at ways to improve and develop so we can achieve the best outcomes for our children.
5. The Assessment Team have continued to be a relatively stable staff team and although there remain some agency workers in place, we have recently recruited a further two workers to permanent positions and we have had 1 agency go permanent and another will be permanent later in July 2024. There is current recruitment out to advert to replace the current agency workers with permanent members of staff. We have completed a further practice week within the assessment service which commenced 17 June 2024 where our dip sample audit reviewed management oversight, quality of visits assessments and planning for us to strengthen and develop our service. During practice week observations of visits and direct work with children has taken place alongside observations of strategy meetings, conference, and MA meetings. We will continue to review 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:**

6. The Head of Quality, Learning and Review and PSW completed a review of the RAD unit this month, which reflected that the number of children and young people In Our Care and children and young people subject to Child Protection Planning requiring the allocation of an IRO has decreased by 12% between April 23 and April 24. This is a decrease of 42% between 2021 and April 2024. The unit remains stable, and we are seeing a steady improvement in ICPC/RCPC and Cared for review timeliness, with RCPC timeliness hitting 100% in both April and May.
7. Recruitment has successfully been completed for two full time Practice Lead Auditors (PLAs), who will sit within The Centre for Practice Excellence. The successful candidates are due to commence in August 2024. PLAs will work alongside the service to implement the new Quality Assurance Framework which was finalised this month. PLAs will deliver and report on quality assurance activities and learning across

all areas of children's social care. This will include the delivery of group audits, which continue to be positively received by the service.

8. The Principle Social Worker (PSW) newsletter is now embedded, and monthly drop-ins are also in place with the PSW providing all staff with a conduit for practice and workplace discussion and reflection. This feeds into the key responsibility of the PSW in ensuring that the views of social workers and practitioners are represented to senior managers. New recording guidance has been developed and shared across the service, to support practitioners in developing the purposefulness and quality of their recording in children's records, whilst increasing consistency of practice.
9. The next cohort of students to commence with Middlesbrough via the Frontline arrangement have been agreed and we are looking forward to them joining us in September. Our ASYE manager has returned from a period of absence and their colleague is due to return from maternity leave in September. The Social Work Academy Team Manager is now established, and the Senior Social worker vacancy has been recruited to (commencing 01/08/2024). As a result, the Social Work Academy is now fully staffed and excitedly preparing for its next cohort of students. Staff are all working to further develop the student experience and ensure our students are provided with a supportive experience that encourages them to remain with Middlesbrough as they progress in their careers.

➤ **Safeguarding & Care Planning/Children with Disabilities:**

10. Safeguarding & Care Planning, Children with Disabilities, Aspire and Pre-birth Team
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 in considering the children who have been subject to intervention for a longer period, to enable assurance that children are not experiencing drift in care planning, ongoing harm, or unnecessary intervention.
11. This means children's cases are escalated and deescalated appropriately. We have undertaken a review of practice, process, and the experiences of children subject to pre proceedings and care proceedings and are awaiting the final report and recommendations before considering changes we can make to improve the effectiveness of this for children. The overall caseloads for social workers in the safeguarding teams has decreased with the average caseload being about 22 cases. Reflecting the picture in neighbouring local authorities, the recruitment of experienced social workers continues to be 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 a rolling ad for social workers across the wider service. The innovate team has now left the service and we have recruited one permanent member of staff who are all in the process of coming into post over the next few weeks. This has meant children have experienced a change of social work and the teams have taken to the workload from the team.

➤ **Children Looked After (CLA):**

12. The service has experienced a short period of stability. This has enabled the teams to work through the drift and delay, from previous workers and plans for children are being progressed. Tracy Jelfs who is an experienced Head Of Service (HOS), commenced as planned in March 2024, as interim Head of Service and covers the role across CLA, Pathways, Leaving Care and Fostering. The numbers of children allocated to Social Workers remains at a good level, assisting the staff to support the children in a timely manner. Resolving the drift and delay has taken time to understand and progress the required tasks. The Service Manager is effective in supporting the work of the service and developing further good practice. As a result, the performance and standards of practice continue to improve in the service. There have been worries about the data not accurately reflecting the work of the service and this should be resolved in July 2024, when reports are amended to collate the data correctly. This has also been an issue for Pathways 1.

➤ **Pathways:**

13. The permanent Service Manager for Pathways has left their role with Middlesbrough in June 2024. An interim Service Manager commenced in May 2024, to cover the absence of the permanent post holder and remains in post. A new HOS Tracy Jelfs, commenced in post in March 2024. Work has progressed at pace in this area, as a Focused Visit is expected by Ofsted imminently. The service has 2 permanent Team Managers, with a new manager starting at the end of May. Pathways 1 has 60% permanent staff, whilst Pathways 2 is fully staffed with permanent colleagues.

14. Additional Personal Advisors have been provided to the service when it became apparent that several young people were not open to the service, who should be open following a previous change in legislation, which would increase demand in the service. Housing, health, education, employment, and training have been the focus of developments and improvements in the service over the past few months. The Care Leavers Offer has been updated, housing protocol is under review and drop ins for young people has been established in Middlesbrough. In addition, the operational group has been established regarding supporting young people's housing needs and a strategic group, planning for future needs has been established. Audits have progressed to understand the gaps in practice and briefing sessions have been established to support good practice. It is evident that staff know their young people and can advocate on their behalf.

➤ **Residential, Supported Accommodation, Resource and Care Leavers:**

15. Children's Residential home.

We have recently experienced a few issues within some of our homes; Holly Lodge has recently been inspected as Inadequate and Futures for Families has been graded by Ofsted as Requires Improvement – all other homes are graded by Ofsted as Good. We have recently appointed an interim Head of Service who has started in post on 02/07/2024. The new interim head of service will review all the homes and put in plans in line with the improvement notice.

HIGHLIGHTS:

16. I would like to stress that given that the difficulties we have experienced over the past few years or so, within our service delivery. I can now certainly and comfortably say that the situations are now much more settled, and we are making improvement. Having said that there are still a lot of work and a lot of challenges to overcome. I am confident that having appropriate, permanent workforce with relevant skills, knowledge, and the dedications, I am sure we are moving to a right direction.

17. I personally would like to thank and appreciate all our staff members for their tireless work and strong commitments to Children's Services, to the Council and its town.

THE TIME AHEAD:

18. We are continuing to work with SHIFT project, in the best interests of our children and young people. Working with ISLINGTON project in terms of good practice and obtaining training for the Staff members, ie. for the middle management team.

19. Working with the South Tees Safeguarding Children's Partnership Board looking at and addressing some of the significant issues i.e., Deprivation, Poor housing, and High level of unemployment in the area, which are the main causes affecting the lives of our young people. Keeping in mind that Children and young people are our future, and we want to offer them every opportunity to achieve their best potential.

20. I continue to work with the HeadStart Project and recently met with Wendy Kelly Senior Manager looking at how some of the issues affecting the mental health of our children and young people in general.

21. I am also working with The Council 's HR department and looking at the Diversity and Equality inclusion and Diversity strategy. Exploring the important areas to address in terms of hard to reach out certain BAME cultural groups and other disadvantaged communities' inclusion into wider and mainstream employment opportunities.

NAME: Cllr Zafar Uddin

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