

EXECUTIVE MEMBER REPORT TO COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: CHILDREN'S SERVICES - COUNCILLOR ZAFAR UDDIN

DATE OF MEETING: 16.10.2024

1. 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:

2. 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)**

3. The Stronger Families Service remains stable and is performing well, to ensure continuous improvement and to strengthen direct work with children and young people, a service development session for all staff has taken place. The session was interactive on how to use tools effectively to gather meaningful voice of the child. Colleagues from Frontline social work training also engaged with the session, this provided a learning opportunity for their development. Feedback was extremely positive, moving forward the session will be delivered by Early Help within next year's Social Work Practice week. In September Elaine Carter was appointed as the new head of service, which is positive news, Elaine has worked for Middlesbrough for a number of years.
4. Young People Not in Education Employment and Training (NEET)
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 national 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.

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

5. We are continuing our work with Multi Agency Partners to strengthen of our Multi Agency Partnerships, to ensure we have appropriate and timely decision making to meet the needs of our children. The weekly MACH Audits continue weekly, and our Multi Agency Audit continue on a monthly basis to ensure we know ourselves well in terms of strengths and areas to improve.

6. We are working to strengthen the MACH Strategic and operational board and will be reviewing the Front Door arrangement with our SLIP partners Islington. We continue with our practice and positivity weeks every 3 months which supports our development and celebrated areas of good practice.

➤ **Assessment Service**

7. The Assessment Team have continued to be a relatively stable staff team with 5 Permanent Team Managers. It is acknowledged that there has been significant change within the assessment service, and this has been possible due to practice improvements within the service. We are providing more timely and proportionate assessment and signposting to the right parts of the service to meet the child and family needs. There remain some agency workers in place within the assessment service, however, we have adverts for recruitment. Weekly performance remains a focus however, there is also a real focus on the quality of our assessments, purposeful visits, and direct work around the Voice of the child/Lived daily experience. Practice and Positivity weeks will continue to take place three monthly to develop practice and celebrate good social work Practice.

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

8. Safeguarding & Care Planning, Children with Disabilities, Aspire and Pre-birth Team We have continued to explore our options to stabilise the workforce, this has included appointing permanently to the Head of Service Role and Service Manager. The other Service Manager post holder is on maternity, and we are now covering this by giving an opportunity to a permanent Team Manager to "act up." The impact of having a stable leaderships team across Safeguarding and Care Planning and Children with Disabilities will allow us to set consistent expectation and decision making for the workforce and for children and young people. We have begun discussions with agency social workers currently working for the teams about their options to go permanent and some have shown an interest in this. The advert for permanent staff is now live to begin a targeted recruitment campaign as part of the whole service approach to this.
9. September has seen the launch of the Youth Participation Project Pilot; this is done in conjunction with the Family Court and gives the opportunity for children and young people over the age of 12 to meet with the Judge who is overseeing their care proceedings and therefore permanence planning. The aim being that Judges get first hand insight into the lived experience of young people and the voice of the is heard even more clearly through the court process. By the end of September the Pre Case Management Hearing Meeting Pilot will also be "live", this is also within the family justice arena and will mean that when the decision is made to issue care proceedings from this time will be subject to a new process that involves a meeting between the social worker and allocated Children's Guardian (CAFCASS) and their legal representatives to discuss the Local Authority plan and rationale, as well as clarifying contact details for the family for the Guardian so that relationships within the process can be established earlier and therefore be more effective in permanence planning through the legal process for children and young people.

10. Within Children with Disabilities, we are continuing to work to understand the demographics of families and their needs to ensure they have support at the right threshold and to review the circumstances of those felt to be particularly vulnerable or in need of a high level of support to ensure that is in place across the partnership.

➤ **Children Looked After (CLA):**

11. The service has continued with a few changes in staffing over the past month. Drift and delay have been reduced. The numbers of children allocated to Social Workers remains at a good level, assisting the staff to engage with children and complete relevant tasks. The Service Manager and teams have evidenced significant progress around data, with it now showing as 'green' and has systems in place to support the service to ensure that these tasks are completed to evidence the work of the service. Work continues around quality and consistency evidenced in children's records and uses stop the clock days, service development sessions and training.

➤ **Pathways:**

12. The letter from the Focused Visit to the Pathways Service has now been published. This was a very positive visit, which evidenced that we knew the service, what was working well, what we were worried about and what needed to happen. Staff knew their young people well and were increasingly including them in their planning for the future. Staff were pleased with this outcome and are keen to further develop the services for young people in Middlesbrough. The required aspects of the service which we have implemented since May 2024 around housing, Adult Social Care etc. are established and working well. A review of the service as a whole has been completed, to consider the next steps following the recent inspection. Training sessions continue with good engagement in the teams around quality of practice and a bespoke training for Personal Advisors is being developed. Performance data continues to improve, albeit with the issues noted above still occurring. Work is progressing on recruiting Social Workers to permanent posts, to continue to improve stability in the workforce and reduce the use of agency workers.

➤ **Learning, Review and Development:**

13. The Quality Assurance team are now fully staffed, and the Practice Lead Auditors (PLAs) have delivered training and information sessions with our new cohort of Approach Social Work students (formally Frontline) and those moving into their Approved and Supported Year of Employment (ASYE) in the Social Work Academy. PLAs are developing and timetabling further training and workshops to be delivered across the next three months to the wider social care service areas, whilst also providing one to one support to practitioners in relation to best practice.

14. Work is also under way in the development of a central SharePoint location, where practitioners will be able to locate and access best practice tools, such as one minute

practice guides, direct work tools, guidance materials, practice standards and up to date policies and procedures. PLAs continue to facilitate group audit activities, supporting practitioners to build on their audit skills. PLAs have commenced delivery of the QA Framework and monthly meetings are due to commence in October to include and support assurance around audit tracking and learning. Workshops and training sessions are being designed and will be offered to service areas between now and the end of this year in connection with the audit findings and needs identified within our Improvement and Development Plan.

15. Monthly Principal Social Worker drop-in sessions continue to be offered to staff and feedback during recent induction events identified areas of positive experiences for most new starters, regarding their onboarding and induction with Middlesbrough. The induction conversations also highlighted challenges for new starters regarding the volume of mandatory training they are required to be complete in the induction period. Confirming that the current work being completed to rationalise this training remains relevant. Induction also highlighted several practitioners leaving employment in neighbouring Local Authorities to come to Middlesbrough.
16. Our Participation team continues to work with our cared for children and young people to hear from them how we better shape and improve services. They also continue to work within local schools canvassing the views of Middlesbrough children and young people. The Participation team has this month drafted a refreshed Participation Strategy, within which they are seeking to increase their reach across Middlesbrough's children and young people.
17. In addition to this two of our Care Ambassadors have been nominated for a National Voice Award and are due to attend the Awards event in Manchester next month.

➤ **Residential, Resource, Supported Accommodation:**

18. The service comprises of 6 children's homes. There are 3 homes graded as good currently, these have been consistent in maintaining this grading for some time. For the three homes not graded as good an internal review is focusing on next steps to improve overall delivery across the service. Training has been a focus for the service as part of improving service delivery. This will continue via the established quality and performance management meetings, held bimonthly.
19. A review of how residential services are delivered is underway as part of developing a longer-term vision for the service. Supported accommodation is in the process of being registered with the Local authority having submitted the required paperwork some time ago. There are no timescales on the completion of this as OFSTED report delays link to their capacity. Eleven families progressed to a family group conference this month with 21 referrals being received overall. The staff are multi-trained, and the capacity was used to support social workers in delivering supervised family time and life story work.

HIGHLIGHTS:

20. This year we are on track to approve 15 new fostering families, which in the current financial climate is a real achievement.

THE TIME AHEAD:

21. I have briefly shared at the previous meeting that, a major milestone in the progress of Middlesbrough's Children's Services. After four years of government oversight, we have officially been removed from direct intervention. This is testament to the hard work and refreshed leadership of the current administration and our passionate and dedicated Children's Services staff who have worked tirelessly to deliver these improvements for the benefit of our children in care.

22. Middlesbrough Council will always fight for children and young people, ensuring that we do all we can to give them the best start in life. Inspectors confirmed this in their letters, when they said the Council's new leadership team and elected members have "demonstrated a tangible commitment to radically improve outcomes". We remain determined to continue to improve Children's Services.

23. I acknowledge that there are still a lot to do and a lot of challenges to overcome and I am confident that our senior staff have a really strong sense of our strengths and where we can still make improvements in the best interest of our children and young people, and their families.

NAME: Cllr Zafar Uddin

DATE: 16.10.2024.