

## EXECUTIVE MEMBER REPORT TO COUNCIL

**EXECUTIVE MEMBER:** Executive Member for Children's Services

**DATE OF MEETING:** 27 November 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.

### COUNCIL PLAN PRIORITIES

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.

### HIGHLIGHTS

#### Appointment as Executive Member for Children's Services

1. I was thrilled when the Mayor asked me to serve in his Executive as the Executive Member for Children's Services earlier this month. I want to thank my predecessor, Cllr Uddin, for everything he did to support the young people of Middlesbrough. I'm grateful for the support and advice he has given me since I was appointed on 4 November.
2. Keeping the young people in our care safe and ensuring they have the best possible start in life are two of the most important duties we have as a Council. Children's Services received a damning judgement from Ofsted in late 2019. Since then, the improvement journey that the service has embarked upon has been tough but impressive. There is much we need to do to continue to improve and modernise – amplifying the voice of care experienced young people, making sure our care is high quality and consistent, strengthening our offer to foster carers and delivering efficiencies that mean we can target our resources better. I am committed to working with our staff, partner agencies and most of all our young people to make sure we lock in the improvement we've seen so far going forward.

### SHiFT

3. I had an introductory meeting with Dr Amy Ludlow, the Chief Executive of SHiFT, who are partnering with Middlesbrough Council to work on intensive support for 27 of our most vulnerable young people. The three-year project is in its first six months, with the focus on building relationships with the young people. This partnership is a real opportunity to change the lives of those most at risk of falling into worsening cycles of behaviour. It is also an opportunity for us to learn and innovate, and to use money more effectively – the intensive intervention undertaken can save £8 for every £1 spent over five years.

### Fostering

4. Our team is working to increase our offer to foster carers. This has seen us increase our payments, meaning we are now one of the more competitively priced local authorities in the region. However, the support our foster carers need is more than just financial.

That's why we offer training and support and officers are working on a carer of the month initiative from January to increase recognition of the work foster carers do.

### **Early Help via the Stronger Families Service**

5. The Stronger Families Service remains stable and is performing well, reviewing the feedback from the direct work session highlighted the importance of learning opportunities for staff. To maintain the continuous improvement, in January the service is hosting a development session 'Back to Basics'. The session will be interactive, providing staff the opportunity to lead on delivery to ensure continuous growth for staff and ownership of our practice.
6. We are expecting to achieve successful outcomes for 663 families in 2024/25. In December 2024 the National Supporting Families Delivery Officer will be visiting Middlesbrough with a focus on our progress against the Early Help Systems Guide (EHSG) and sharing of good practice.

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

7. 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.
8. I'm proud to say we are performing well against all key national measures and Middlesbrough has been identified by the Department for Education as a top performer regarding the participation of young people in education, training, and employment opportunities. The team have recently completed the September Guarantee - a guarantee of an offer, made by the end of September, of an appropriate place in post-16 education or training for every young person completing compulsory education. The team exceed their target of 96.7% - achieving 96.8%.
9. The team are currently engaged in the Annual Activity Survey to establish young people's destinations, on 1 November, in the year they completed compulsory education.

### **Cared for Children**

10. The service has continued with a few changes in staffing over the past month. A more stable service is delivering results with drift and delay being reduced - although legacy issues are still being found at times and addressed. The numbers of children allocated to individual social workers remains at a good level, assisting the staff to engage effectively with children and complete relevant tasks. However, we expect an increase in the numbers of children allocated to workers as we are currently seeing increased numbers of children coming through from Safeguarding and Care Planning Teams.
11. The Service Manager and teams have maintained their progress around data and have 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 the teams use stop the clock days, service development sessions and training. Work is currently being undertaken around the collation of data due to system changes being required.

### **Supporting our Young People Moving into Adulthood**

12. Planned changes to the service to support young people's transition are bedding in. As per the plan for the service, another manager has been added. We have three Pathways teams, one supporting 16–18-year-old young people and two for 18–25-year-olds.

Measures implemented since May 2024 to integrate support for housing and links with Adult Social Care are in place.

13. We are developing a care leaver offer through the Council's decision-making process. This will give those who are care experienced the right start to adult life in Middlesbrough.
14. As well as the care leaver offer, next steps are to continue training sessions around quality of practice and a bespoke training for Personal Advisors is being developed. Ensuring the quality of the support we give is consistent for all our young people is an area of focus for our staff. 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.

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

15. The MACH is our front door – the first point of contact for concerns about a young person. The social work staff team within the MACH are permanent workers and are very effective in the day-to-day screening and signposting to appropriate services to the children of Middlesbrough and their families.
16. A key part of the way MACH works is its partnership approach with services like CAMHS, Cleveland Police, health and education. Staff are continuing our work with these partners to strengthen our Multi Agency Partnerships, holding bi-monthly Strategic and Operational Boards.
17. Professional development, learning and reflection are vital to this service. The team continue to facilitate weekly audits looking at different presenting issues, effectiveness and timeliness of screening as well as informing further learning and development sessions for the Team. Our staff also facilitate Multi Agency Audits on a monthly basis with key partners to ensure we know ourselves well in terms of strengths and areas to improve. Practice and positivity weeks also occur every 3 months which support development and celebrated areas of good practice.
18. The Assessment Service has had a period of change due to a review of how it was structured. That said, work has been undertaken to roll out development sessions that ensure we are completing good assessments for our children and ensure that signposting to the most appropriate service is timely and appropriate to meet needs.
19. The Team have continued to be a relatively stable staff team with. There remain some agency workers in place within the assessment service, however, the workers we have within the service have remained there for a period of time and we are regularly having discussion with them about converting to permanent which two of the workers have already done. This is a real vote of confidence for us as an authority and the improvement we have seen. We continue to have adverts for out for recruitment.

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

20. Recruiting a permanent workforce remains a priority in order to achieve consistent standards of practice and continuity for families, this remains a challenge as it is for the sector across the country. Despite a higher than desired need for agency social workers we are reassured that those in post are committed to Middlesbrough and contribute to a relatively stable workforce currently. Hard work from staff is continuing to mean that working directly for the Council is a desirable option.
21. The numbers of children allocated to social workers in the SCP teams is an area of scrutiny at this time, although they are manageable, they have started to increase. We are exploring options to ensure the impact of this is mitigated for the workforce and children allocated to enable effective service delivery.

22. We have seen a rise in Children subject to Child Protection plans over the summer. Staff are analysing this to understand the reasons behind this rise - initial analysis highlights large sibling groups, rather than an overall significant rise in the number of family units. Understanding this is important and staff will complete a deep dive around this to understand what is happening for families in Middlesbrough and their children to give assurance around decision making and threshold.
23. We are working on reviewing our Short Break offer for families, initially through understanding current need and use of services available. This will allow us to ensure we provide the right services for the right children who have diverse and individual needs and challenges.
24. In Family Justice we have begun our process of meeting with CAFCASS prior to the first court hearing, as part of a National Pilot project. The aim is to allow conversations and planning to take place prior to court hearing to enable a more seamless process and constructive use of court time and therefore more timely decision making for children. 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 child 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, meaning decisions to issue care proceedings will be subject to a new process that involves a meeting between the social worker, allocated Children's Guardian from CAFCASS and their legal representatives to discuss the Local Authority plan and rationale.

### **Residential and Supported Accommodation**

25. Providing support for our young people within the borough is not only often best for the young person but also more cost-effective to the Council. We need to make sure that the accommodation we provide is of the best standards. Middlesbrough has six residential homes for children: Rosecroft, Holly Lodge, Futures for Families, Willow, Firtree and Gleneagles. Currently, three are judged by Ofsted to be good, one is rated inadequate and two are rated as requires improvement. A new service manager is in place who is driving forward the improvements in the homes and two recent monitoring visits from Ofsted for Futures for families and Firtree (both RI) have shown that work is paying off, with the visits demonstrated improvements. We will continue to review the way we provide residential accommodation with a view to driving up standards and using resources as effectively as possible.
26. New rules mean that our supported accommodation – accommodation for 16 and 17 year olds who require support to enable them to live semi-independently – needs to be registered with Ofsted. Staff have been preparing for the interviews that are needed to achieve Ofsted registration, which will take place on the 20 November 2024. Daniel Court remains at 100% occupancy with 4 young people turning 18 over the next 2 months. At Fulbeck Road, one of the flats is unoccupied while an issue with mould is put right and the flat is refurbished.
27. Supported lodging is provided by hosts in a similar way to foster care. The support providers give to young people can be life-changing and increasing the number of hosts is a priority. We have recently lost one provider, however gained another with two current queries for potential hosts. Plans are in place to explore a new offer in supported accommodation.