

## EXECUTIVE MEMBER REPORT TO COUNCIL

### EXECUTIVE MEMBER: EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES

**DATE OF MEETING:** 15 January 2025

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

#### 1. 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.

##### KEY FIGURES

- **Number of families accessing early help via Middlesbrough Council:** 658
- **Number of foster carers with Middlesbrough Council:** 80 foster carers, 56 connected carers, looking after a total of 178 children.
- **Number of children in our care:** 505
- **Percentage of children in our care in Education, employment or training:** 88.3% of all children aged five to 18. (96.7% of five to 15 years-olds and 64.5% for 16+.)

#### 2. HIGHLIGHTS

##### Update

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

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.

Staff are continuing our work with multi agency partners to strengthen of our multi agency partnerships, holding bi-monthly Strategic and Operational boards. As outlined previously, professional development, learning and reflection are vital to this service.

This takes place through weekly MACH audits looking at different presenting issues effectiveness and reflecting on practice. The team also facilitates multi agency audits monthly with key partners. The service holds practice and positivity weeks every three months which support our development and celebrated areas of good practice. The most recent Practice and Positivity week took place from Monday 9 December

2024. This was a positive week with direct observations of practice such as triage, strategy meetings and screening discussions with families, across the MACH service, learning and development sessions as well as audits completed by the Head of Service and Service Manager.

The Assessment Service determine what interventions are required after the MACH have dealt with the initial enquiry. The service continues to be a relatively stable staff team with some agency workers in place within the assessment service. There is a real focus on the consistency and quality of assessment, purposeful visits and direct work around the voice of the child and lived daily experience. Practice and Positivity weeks will continue to take place for this team too, to develop practice and celebrate good social work Practice. The next Practice and Positivity week for the assessment service takes place this week.

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

The Stronger Families service aims to support families early in order to stop the need for young people being taken into care. Working with families to keep children in a safe home is better for the young person's wellbeing and it is more cost effective.

The Stronger Families Service continues to be a stable service where early help support is provided to 658 families. We are expecting to achieve successful outcomes for 663 families in 2024/25. In line with our drive for continuous improvement, in January the service is hosting a development session 'Back to Basics'.

Middlesbrough received £1,302,900 funding allocation through the government's Supporting Families initiative for early help in 2024/25. Part of the funding is paid on a payment by results basis for achieving successful family outcomes with a minimum number of families. The maximum PBR grant was originally set at 663 successful family outcomes (£530,400). However, this has been reviewed and Middlesbrough has received an additional upfront funding of £73,600 reducing the PBR return grant to £456,800 (571 claims). The first 571 successful family outcomes we report will result in £800 payments per outcome. The subsequent 92 outcomes will not result in further payments as we have, in effect, received the equivalent funding at the start of the financial year. This funding change does not alter the expectations on achieving 663 successful family outcomes in 2024/25.

The National Supporting Families Delivery Officer was due to visit Middlesbrough in December with a focus on our progress against the Early Help Systems Guide (EHSG) and sharing of good practice. This has been postponed to February to allow changes to be in.

## **2.3 Fostering**

The Fostering Service is split into three teams focussing on recruitment, support to current approved carers and support to connected carers – carers within the young person's wider family or friendship circle. Foster carers provide stable and supportive homes for young people and the work they do is more effective in terms of outcomes and cost than residential placements.

We currently have 80 mainstream carers, who provide homes for 102 children. There are 56 temporary and fully approved connected carers, who provide homes for 76 children. Growing the number of foster carers is a priority for us and we have seen some promising results so far. Between April 2024 and December 2024, we recruited 14 new foster carers - this is two and a half times more than all other LAs in the northeast region.

I attended the We Matter Christmas party at MyPlace in December. The event was an excellently organised one, with food and music, a photo station, crafting area and Santa's grotto. Olaf from Frozen was also in attendance. I really enjoyed the opportunity to speak to both children and to foster carers who were honest and insightful about their views of how we can improve the support we offer foster carers.

Former foster carers with Middlesbrough Council Caroline and Gordon McGough have each been awarded an MBE for their work as foster carers. Over 29 years the Acklam couple have fostered more than 90 children and adopted two of them. They have supported young people and allowed them to thrive. Many are still in contact with them and many now have families of their own. Foster carers like the McGough's do incredible work and it's lovely to see their work recognised. I would like to add my congratulations to Gordon and Caroline for all they have done for young people in Middlesbrough.

Middlesbrough Council is part of Foster with North East, a partnership of 12 local authorities aimed at increasing recruitment and support for foster carers.

Representatives met in December to discuss whether to continue the project for another two years and we await their proposals for what that would look like.

As part of the work we are doing to review our use of Care Orders (see paragraph 15) We are updating our Special Guardianship Order policy – this relates to a connected family member or family friend taking on caring responsibilities for a young person, short of a full Care Order being issued to bring the young person into local authority care.

As well as looking to discharge Care Orders, staff have reviewed the barriers for family members to caring for a young person. The main barriers are accessing appropriate financial support, services, training and help if situations change as children get older. As a result of this review, we are developing a transformation programme for fostering which will see a team in place to support the assessment of connected carers as well as post-Care Order support. We will also have a formal framework for review, a training package will be further developed to support carers, along with the extension of support groups for carers.

## **2.4 Cared for Children**

Within Middlesbrough there are currently 505 children who are cared for with a further 16 children exiting care. 88.3% of all children in our care aged five and over are in education, employment or training (broken down as 96.7% of five to 15 years-olds and 64.5% of 16+.)

Caseloads for workers remain at a reasonable level in order to support staff to develop relationships with the children and young people and complete work in a timely way. As outlined in the last report, we continue to see increased numbers of children coming through from Safeguarding and Care Planning Teams, which will increase the numbers of children allocated to workers, however managers have a clear oversight of this and allocations are discussed frequently between the services to support effective transitions. During December, we saw the three agency Team Managers convert into permanent Team Manager positions with the authority. In January, we plan to recruit a permanent Service Manager.

The shift in culture has continued within the service for staff at all levels to understand the importance of data alongside improving the quality of the work to children, young people and families. Much progress in ensuring that data accurately reflects the work

of the service has been made, however, some issues do remain. This is being followed up to seek a resolution, so that it is reported correctly. The Team Managers and Service Manager for cared for children continue to collate their data manually in the interim. Measures like assigning children with complex needs, two social workers is proving effective in providing consistency and support to young people.

Care Orders are the legal order by which a young person is taken into Local Authority care. However, sometimes circumstances change and the order can be discharged, or another order – such as a special guardianship order allowing the young person to be cared for by connected family member – might be more appropriate. We were successful in obtaining funding from the DfE to support a review of all children with a Care Order in order to look at whether the right arrangements are in place. This initially started just within CLA teams but has expanded into Safeguarding and Care Planning as well from December 2024. This process takes time and the DfE workers are progressing assessments and reviews. Allocated workers within the team not funded by the DfE continue to progress discharge of Care Orders as well, with a number being successfully discharged or changed to other Orders such as Special Guardianship Orders (SGO).

## **2.5 Pathways team - supporting our young people moving into adulthood**

During November and December, we integrated our Pathways 1, which looks at the transition to adulthood, into CLA team 4. This means that the CLA teams will keep children open to them until they reach 18 years of age, instead of a change at 16 years and then again at 18 years. It was felt that this would be better for young people to have the same oversight, with less changes in Social Workers. This leaves two Pathways teams, now known as Pathways 1 and 2, who support young people aged 18-25.

The care leaver offer is continuing to be developed. This will give those who are care experienced the right start to adult life in Middlesbrough.

Training for Personal Advisors who are assigned to care leavers continues to be a priority to support their work with 18–25-year-olds. Supervisions are now taking place as per the requirements and staff feel supported. Data accuracy remains an issue but staff continue to improve the data we hold on care leavers.

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

The Safeguarding & Care Planning team support children on a Child in Need and Child Protection plans, as well as children that are looked after for up to six months. Our Aspire team sits within this team and focusses on supporting children who are vulnerable to exploitation, trafficking or falling into criminal activity. We continue to monitor closely the number of children allocated to social workers and have seen an increase as children require allocation swiftly from assessment within our Safeguarding and Care Planning Teams. These numbers are higher than we would like. That said the social workers continue to ensure children are seen in timescales required meaning their experiences are understood.

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 the high number of agency staff within the service, turnover of staff remains stable, and one agency worker has converted to permanent in December.

After rising between the summer and October, the numbers of children being subject to a child protection plan appears to have plateaued in the last couple of months. As mentioned in my report in November, a deep dive into the increase in child protection numbers took place and the results will be provided to the Executive Director for Children's Services and myself in due course. The use of panels to consider the circumstances of children subject to child protections for over a year remains effective is giving us assurance that children are not subject to plans for longer than needed and that interventions are effective, and children are supported in the right way across the threshold. At the same time, we continue to monitor children subject to plans for a second time, which is higher than we would aim, to understand if we are ending plans prematurely. Work around this will be undertaken in the New Year. We have seen a similar pattern at lower intervention levels.

We have received some significant and positive feedback from the courts across December, notably a recognition of our use of pre-proceedings before we issue care proceedings to enable quicker and proportionate use of the court to secure permanence for children. In the New Year we will provide briefings to all staff regarding new arrangements for ratifying and reviewing children involved in the Family Justice system, aimed at ensuring we are utilising the court only when necessary and with purpose, building on the progress the court has already noted.

Within Children with Disabilities, staff have worked to ensure we can be clear on performance in line with visiting expectations, and that family's circumstances and need for contact with their social worker is proportionate to need. There are no children who have not had their circumstances reviewed and assessed in over a year giving us a level of assurance that families are receiving support in line with need. We are now focusing on understand the outcomes for children we are trying to achieve with the support packages they have, across the Children with Disabilities service, including short breaks to ensure the resource we are providing has the maximum impact on children and their families. Numbers of children accessing the service remains steady and social workers have adapted well to slightly increased numbers of children allocated in line with the realignment of the structure.

## **2.7 Residential and Supported Accommodation**

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. The commissioned service recruited to manage Holly Lodge in September has been extended in December to the end of March 2025. This is due to a range of options being explored currently regarding the future of the home.

Long term sickness has been impacting on the service and staff have worked additional hours to ensure stability and continuity of care. Staff sickness has been reviewed with HR to ensure timely support is being offered in line with procedures. Vacant posts in other homes continue to be filled.

Our peer support from Islington Borough Council is working with us to focus on trauma-informed practice. For residential service colleague, this has been reflective sessions just for registered managers to support them in their leadership and management.

The service has been working with the safeguarding, care planning & children with disabilities team to strengthen operational delivery in targeted areas such as edge of care. This work is in an early stage of development and links to the transformation of service delivery. Work on the performance scorecard is underway to align residential, resources and supported lodgings performance with other areas of children's services. Whilst there were no external inspections this month, internal audits have continued. The registered managers monthly audits are now shared with the quality assurance team as part of the wider development, feedback and learning to improve consistency of practice.

## **2.8 Learning, Review and Development**

Improving the quality and consistency of practice is a priority for Children's Services as a whole. Our Quality Assurance team have developed and timetabled training and delivered one-to-one support to practitioners in relation to best practice. Upcoming training covers understanding the lived experience of children, voice of the child and recording direct work, analytical assessment training and risk analysis training. Audit training sessions are timetabled for January 2025 for all Childrens Social Care staff who complete audits.

The new cohort of Approach Social Work students (formally Frontline) who joined us in September have now settled in and are beginning to take on greater responsibilities in our work with our children, young people, and their families at a child in need level.

Work also continues 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.

The Independent Reviewing Officer service has completed recruitment for the vacant IRO post, with a new member of the team having joined this month. However, the team sadly experienced high levels of sickness in November.

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 drafted a refreshed Participation Strategy, within which they are seeking to increase their reach across Middlesbrough's children and young people. In addition to this the team are preparing an annual forecast of events to support increased engagement through allowing people to free up diaries in advance.