

MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL



Report of:	Director of Public Health and Executive Director of Children's Services
Relevant Executive Member:	Executive Member for Children's Services Executive Member for Adult Social Care and Public Health
Submitted to:	Executive
Date:	30 April 2025
Title:	Thrive at Five
Report for:	Decision
Status:	Public
Council Plan priority:	A successful and ambitious town
Key decision:	Yes
Why:	Decision(s) will incur expenditure or savings above £250,000 and have a significant impact in two or more wards
Subject to call in?:	Yes
Why:	Non-urgent

Executive summary

Thrive at Five is a registered national charity that aims to help children in the early years develop strong foundations for life and learning. They are a place-based initiative, bringing significant resource and capacity to the areas within which they work.

Middlesbrough Council wish to enter into a partnership agreement with Thrive at Five to strengthen our approach to improve school readiness outcomes through building capacity in communities by supporting parents and carers and enable collaboration across the public, private and voluntary sectors to achieve sustainable change.

This report recommends that:

1. The Executive approves the investment into the partnership model with Thrive at Five.

2. The Executive approves in principle to enter into the five-year Partnership Agreement with Thrive at Five subject to legal and finance review and approval.
3. The Executive receive an annual update of progress.

1. Purpose

- 1.1 This requires an Executive decision in line with our constitution at section 6.38.1 (b) which sets out the Executive terms of reference and states that the Executive collectively are responsible for ' Key Decisions, not delegated by the Mayor to an Executive Committee.
- 1.2 Thrive at Five is a registered national charity that aims to help children in the early years develop strong foundations for life and learning. They build capacity in communities by supporting parents and carers and enable collaboration across the public, private and voluntary sectors to achieve sustainable change in early years outcomes. They are a place-based initiative, bringing significant resource and capacity to the areas within which they work. They operate in areas where the Local Authority works as a key partner and are pathfinding the development of an approach and a replicable model that can be implemented across the country.
- 1.3 Thrive at Five are currently working in Stoke-on-Trent and Redcar & Cleveland, as their first and second pathfinders respectively. They are now looking for another area to partner with to deliver a pathfinder. This report outlines the rationale for Middlesbrough agreeing to work with Thrive at five.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That the Executive approves the investment into the partnership model with Thrive at Five.
- 2.2 That the Executive approves in principle to enter into the five-year Partnership Agreement with Thrive at Five subject to legal and finance review and approval.
- 2.3 That the Executive receive an annual update of progress

3. Rationale for the recommended decision(s)

- 3.1 The **Health and Wellbeing Strategy** has adopted a mission-led approach, where each mission is a response to a significant local challenge, where innovation, working together and aligning resources has a big part to play in driving large-scale change – missions cannot be resolved by any single agency acting in isolation. Each mission has a set of ambitious goals that further articulate and explain that mission.
- 3.2 The mission, “We will narrow the attainment gap between children growing up in disadvantage and the national average” includes two goals on children’s attainment, the first one being to “eliminate the school readiness gap between those born into deprivation and their peers”.
- 3.3 The **Middlesbrough Council Plan 2024-2027** includes an aim to improve attainment in education and skills. There are wide inequalities in the abilities of children starting

school in Middlesbrough (see below). The gap in development at Reception age widens as children progress through the school system. Improving the overall school readiness and reducing the gap in attainment is critical to improving attainment on leaving school.

- 3.4 Whilst there has been some progress, it has been difficult to bring about significant and lasting change to the abilities of children starting school. To improve outcomes for children there is a need for a collective effort with the public, voluntary and private sector working more closely together and with better connection to families and the local community. This is exactly what Thrive at Five aims to achieve.
- 3.5 The Thrive at Five model is a partnership approach, with Thrive at Five bringing expertise, enthusiasm and resources. The proposed Council investment will leverage in twice as much additional investment from Thrive at Five.

4. Background and relevant information

Why Focus on the Early Years?

- 4.1 The quality of a child's early experience is vital for their future as children that start school developmentally ready will have a happier, healthier life. Conversely those that start behind fall further behind as they progress through school. School readiness is shaped by many interrelated factors: the effects of poverty, the impact of high-quality early education and care, and the influence of 'good parenting', what parents and carers do daily with their children is important.
- 4.2 In Middlesbrough a significant number of children start school behind their peers without the skills necessary to flourish at school. The average figure hides significant variances between areas of Middlesbrough that contribute to the inequalities experienced – in some communities in Middlesbrough it is more likely that a child will not be ready for school on starting at Reception.
- 4.3 The attainment gap between pupils eligible for free school meals and their peers has continued to grow over the last 20 years, particularly in locations where poverty is at its highest, like Middlesbrough where significant socio-economic challenges have driven inequalities in attainment in recent years.
- 4.4 It is important to highlight that whilst there are significant challenges, many local families overcome barriers daily just to get their children to school and are very resilient in lots of areas of their life.
- 4.5 The early years are an important time for children where their development directly impacts on their future outcomes and life chances. At around five years of age children are measured in school to assess their level of development. A "good level of development" (GLD) in the context of the Early Years Foundation Stage means a child has met the expected levels in five key areas: Personal, Social and Emotional

Development, Physical Development, Communication and Language, Literacy, and Mathematics. These areas are considered fundamental for a child's overall development and readiness for school.

- 4.6 School readiness is a measure of how prepared a child is to succeed in school; cognitively, socially and emotionally and those who are ready for school generally have better outcomes in later life.
- 4.7 The average level of school readiness in Middlesbrough is the second lowest for local authorities in England at 61%. Whilst this figure is very low it hides huge inequalities: school readiness in Middlesbrough ranges from 39% in Central to 79% in Nunthorpe. The UK Government has an opportunity mission to increase the average number of children reaching a Good Level of Development to 75% by 2028, and by working with Thrive at Five it will allow Middlesbrough to be at the forefront of driving change for children in their earliest years who most need support.
- 4.8 Early development profoundly shapes, and is predictive of future outcomes, including performance at GCSEs. A 2022 report from University College London concluded that “half of pupils who fail at age 16 were judged to be behind at age 5”. Focusing our efforts on the early years is one of the best investments we can make for the long-term health, wellbeing, and happiness of people who live in Middlesbrough.

Why Work with Thrive at Five?

- 4.9 Parents and carers, and their children often struggle because the system of support around them in their community is fragmented. A 2021 Government review reported “The Start for Life offer is still patchy, is not joined up, and is not easily accessible for parents, making it almost impossible for them to navigate the system”. Strategies for support are often developed in a piecemeal fashion, without sufficient reference to what the evidence and data, including, critically, the views of parents, tell us about needs and how best to address them.
- 4.10 The result is that the support can be ineffective and, often, too short term. We often do things to families rather than doing things with them, and so fail to harness the power of parents and communities. Thrive at Five seeks to address these issues with a long-term and sustainable solution. Thrive at Five will ensure that the Family Hubs work is integrated within the system and that there is cohesion and join up, thus building capacity and ongoing long-term sustainability. We know that some families are reluctant to receive support directly from the local authority and there is often a stigma attached to support from public services. Many Councils are looking to work with the voluntary and community sector to develop more sustainable and longer-lasting solutions.
- 4.11 Thrive at Five see Middlesbrough as a good fit with their ethos as they want to work in areas where there is a driver of disadvantaged inequalities in levels of child development and strong local system leadership and commitment.

- 4.12 As a local area we have a strong commitment to improve outcomes in the early years, and therefore align well strategically with Thrive at Five. Whilst there has been some progress, it has been difficult to bring about significant and lasting change to the abilities of children starting school. To improve outcomes for children there is a need for a collective effort with the public, voluntary and private sector working more closely together and with better connection to families and the local community. This is exactly what Thrive at Five aims to achieve.
- 4.13 The partnership approach will ensure shared learning generated through the work with Thrive at Five informs the development of a sustainable model on completion of the programme.

The Thrive at Five Approach

- 4.14 Thrive at Five employ a local team which is supported by their national team, Trustee Board and Advisory Council and works collaboratively with local partners, from the public, voluntary and private sector. Thrive at Five provide the support and resource that local organisations need to collaborate and to deliver support to the community more effectively. At the heart of the Thrive at Five model is 'from the ground-up' engagement with local parents whose voices guide the work and who are recruited into the local team as paid employees and volunteers. They are committed to reach all parents in the local community, particularly those who do not currently engage with our services and support and whose voices are seldom heard. Ultimately, they want to improve the lives of the people they work with and see more children reaching a Good Level of Development.
- 4.15 Thrive at Five brings about positive change by ensuring the collective effort of partners to improve five intermediate outcomes (improvements in parent infant relationships; parental wellbeing; quality of the home learning environment; early, language and communication; quality of early education and childcare), all of which are stepping stones towards children reaching a good level of development. They are place-based, aiming to support every child in each of the identified and agreed local areas. These areas will be identified based on current levels of attainment and other indicators once the funding is agreed.
- 4.16 Thrive at Five work with local partners, to ensure children benefit from a pathway of high quality, holistic support from cradle to classroom. They work to establish and strengthen this pathway which is informed by four guiding principles:
- **Collaboration** – with joint and aligned working within and across the public, private, and voluntary sectors.
 - **Evidence** - systematically using data to assess needs and continuously strengthen support.
 - **Community** - building the capacity of parents to create the best possible environments for children's development.

- **Sustainability** - with an emphasis on investing in and embedding inter-generational changes.

4.17 Thrive at Five are committed for a period of five years to properly see through and embed a thorough change process- because it is acknowledged that making sustainable positive changes to early years outcomes takes time.

4.18 The programme will be implemented through a Thrive at Five Partnership Board with key representatives from Thrive at Five, Public Health, Children's Services and Education. This Partnership Board will report progress and outcomes through the Children's Thematic Transformation Board, with annual updates to the Health and Wellbeing Board and Executive.

5. Other potential alternative(s) and why these have not been recommended

5.1 If Middlesbrough Council chose not to enter into a partnership and **do nothing**, we pass-up the opportunity to bring an additional £3m of funding to narrow the outcome gap in school readiness.

5.2 The commitment from Thrive at Five to work with Middlesbrough is an opportunity to bring in investment, capacity and expertise to bring about positive and lasting change for children in the early years which will ultimately reduce the demand for more costly services and intervention in later life.

6. Impact(s) of the recommended decision(s)

Topic	Impact
Financial (including procurement and Social Value)	<p>The total investment for Thrive at Fives's pathfinder areas for the first five years, is £3.6m. This includes a contribution of £0.6m from Middlesbrough Council over three years plus Thrive at Five's contribution of £3m, which includes national and local support team costs. This figure excludes external evaluation costs.</p> <p>There is an expectation that Middlesbrough Council will contribute £0.2m per year initially over three years. Public Health and Children's Services have committed £0.1m each over each of the first three years of the programme, which will cover the £0.6m required.</p> <p>It is proposed that the pathfinder operates for five years, with the Thrive at Five approach gradually becoming embedded as the usual way of working in the local community. Thrive at Five are committed to ensuring the sustainability of the model, which means identifying cost-effective solutions, and working closely</p>

	<p>with parents and the community so they are enabled and empowered as the continued agents of change in the long term.</p> <p>Thrive at Five will sign up to the Social Value Policy and all recruitment will focus on local people who are part of the communities we are looking to focus on.</p>
Legal	The Council will need to sign a Partnership Agreement with Thrive at Five. This agreement will be reviewed and signed by legal and finance as per the process.
Risk	There is no financial risk to Middlesbrough Council and the partners with this approach as funding from Thrive at Five has been identified. Middlesbrough Council's commitment of £600k over three years to Thrive at Five will generate £3m of additional investment into Middlesbrough for children and families.
Human Rights, Public Sector Equality Duty and Community Cohesion	We have already started to work with Thrive at Five to identify the areas with the most disadvantage. The programme will work with up to 2,500 children to close the disadvantage gap in good level of development.
Climate Change / Environmental	There are no specific consequences arising from this report.
Children and Young People Cared for by the Authority and Care Leavers	Whilst children cared for by the Authority are not a specific target group, children in the areas with most disadvantage who are cared for by the Authority will benefit from the Thrive at Five approach
Data Protection	There are no specific consequences arising from this report.

Actions to be taken to implement the recommended decision(s)

The proposed timeline for implementation is to enter into a Partnership Agreement with Thrive at Five by the end of May 2025 and to begin the Discovery Phase and recruitment and development of the core team.

Action	Responsible Officer	Deadline
Sign partnership agreement	Mark Adams/ Joe Tynan	31 May 2025
Determine target wards with max 2,500 children	Graeme Nicholson	31 May 2025
Establish partnership board	Graeme Nicholson	30 June 2025

Agree implementation plan – June 2025	Graeme Nicholson	30 June 2025

Appendices

None.

Background papers

None.

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