

Report of:	Executive Director of Children’s Services: Sue Butcher Deputy Mayor and Lead Member for Children’s Social Care: Councillor Antony High
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Submitted to:	Executive - 16 March 2021
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Subject:	Children’s Services Improvement Programme: Overview of Progress November 2020 - February 2021.
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Summary

Proposed decision
That Executive approves the overview of the strategic and operational work undertaken between November 2020 and February 2021 in line with the Children’s Services Improvement Action Plan 2020/21.

Report for:	Key decision:	Confidential:	Is the report urgent?¹
Information and discussion	Yes as all wards are affected by the need to improve services for vulnerable children.	No	No

Contribution to delivery of the 2020-23 Strategic Plan		
People	Place	Business
We will contribute to promote the welfare of our children, young people and vulnerable adults and protect them from harm, abuse and neglect. We will transform children’s services to allow more		

¹ Remove for non-Executive reports

families to stay together where it is safe for them to do so and reduce the need for children to be looked after by us		
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Ward(s) affected
All wards affected as the need to improve services for children is across the whole of Middlesbrough

What is the purpose of this report?

1. To provide members of the Executive with an overview of the strategic and operational actions undertaken from November 2020 to February 2021 against the Children's Services Action Plan 2020/21. It also sets out the context in which these actions have been carried out and that of delivering against the Children's Services Improvement plan 2020/23. The overall aim is to improve outcomes for Middlesbrough's vulnerable children, young people, families and carers.

Why does this report require a Member decision?

2. It is important that members have a line of sight into the improvement work being undertaken and the impact that it is having on family life in Middlesbrough. This will inform any challenges that they wish to make on the progress being made against the improvement plan and hold officers to account as appropriate.

Report Background

Context

3. This report covers the period from November 2020 to February 2021 i.e. from the time when Middlesbrough's Children's Commissioner Peter Dwyer carried out his virtual visit to gather information for his second report for the Minister until the beginning of the focus on reviewing and revising the action plan for year two of our improvement programme. It is not exhaustive but covers the most significant issues of our improvement work during the named period.
4. It is important to note that the work represented by this report has all been carried out in a COVID lock down period with the accompanying stresses and strains this brings to the families that we are working with but also to our workforce. The Children's Services workforce have been and continue to work from home with virtual visits on an exception basis only. Our staff, indeed staff across the council are juggling home schooling and child care responsibilities and undoubtedly there has some effect on morale. There have been various exercises to lighten the 'atmosphere' particularly in the run up to Christmas and a virtual visit by the Chief Social Worker, Isabelle Trowler in February which has been described as inspirational. However, the feedback I am receiving is that in general terms most staff can't wait to get back into the office.

Quality and Performance

5. One of the overarching themes in this period has been social workers' and social care workers' caseloads. This was highlighted in Ofsted's report following their monitoring visit in September 2020.
6. 'Caseloads are too high across the whole service, but particularly for newly qualified social workers, and for those in the assessment, safeguarding and care planning teams. High caseloads are having a demonstrable impact on the quality of social work practice for children, the throughput of children's cases, the timescales of work completed, management oversight, and the ability to embed learning from audits and training to social workers'.
7. This theme also featured in our Commissioner's report in November 2020, 'caseloads are too high and must be reduced' and although the minister agreed with his recommendation 'that there is sufficient confidence in the changes being made to indicate that this is not an LA where we should move quickly to consider alternative delivery mechanisms' she specifically noted her concerns about out high caseloads.
8. Our response to reducing caseloads has been planned and proactive as rather than recruiting individual agency social workers and team managers we have chosen to commission 'managed teams' focusing on particular areas of demand with the aim of clearing any backlog, increasing timeliness and sharing best practice. In essence these teams should be working themselves of a job!
9. One of the managed teams, funded through an 'invest to save initiative' has been set up to bring children and young people back into Middlesbrough where they belong and to discharge care orders in specific circumstances but both only where it is safe and appropriate to do so. The original contract was for six months until December 2020 however the Council's Executive agreed that the contract could be extended for a maximum of two years subject to reviews on a quarterly basis. The team will continue to work with a rolling case load of 90 – 100 children and young people which will alleviate some of the pressure on the Looked After Children's teams and this alongside reducing the number of looked after children will slowly but robustly begin to reduce caseloads. To date this team has more than met its original invest to save target.
10. Two additional managed teams have been commissioned to be aligned to the Assessment Service for a six month period. Their focus is completing single assessments in a more timely manner and working proactively with children in need to prevent escalation and transfer of work to the Safeguarding and Care Planning service. In time this will reduce caseloads in both the Assessment Service and the Safeguarding and Planning Service. The work of all three teams will give our permanent workforce more scope to focus on compliance and improving practice across these services as a whole. The managed teams will also take more of a role in terms of sharing good practice across the services they are supporting. When the managed teams move on from Middlesbrough there will continue to be sufficient flexibility in the system as work for children and young people will be of a higher quality and progressed to permanence in a more child friendly timescale.
11. Futures for Families (FFF), Middlesbrough's edge of care service based on North Yorkshire Council's No Wrong Door principles went live in late August 2020 and has gone from strength to strength. As of 30th November the service has supported 47 young people with a projection of 120 young people in the first working year. FFF works well with the managed team seeking to bring young people back into

Middlesbrough as they can support this transition for example by a young person being placed with FFF's foster carer so they have space to re-engage with their families and communities.

12. The number of children looked after by Middlesbrough has fallen from an all-time high in August 2020 of 702 to 599 as of 24th February 2021. This is a major success as 103 children now do not have social work intervention in their lives however there remains a significant amount of work to do following on from this decrease such as reducing the number of children subject to child protection plans which is high at 662.
13. The Children with Disabilities (CWD) service moved to sit with the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities service in the Education and Partnerships directorate, approximately nine months ago with short term aim of creating a more inclusive service for CWD and a longer term aim of creating a 0 -25 service. Unfortunately the matrix management arrangements were not successful and audits did not evidence improving practice therefore the decision was taken to move the service back to the Children's social care area at least for the time being. Some longstanding 'acting-up' arrangements have been brought to an end and the service is now being reviewed to assess the impact that the service is having on keeping our most vulnerable children safe and to implement any appropriate actions.
14. Overseen by the Department of Education there remains an important focus on vulnerable children's attendance at school This involves using a bespoke decision making tool used to rag-rate any risk to vulnerable children not being in school and any additional COVID related risk. In addition work is taking place to devise a system for monitoring the educational attainment of vulnerable children and young people. Using the data, analysis and challenge will support us in closing the attainment gap. In general terms relationships with schools have improved by working through Covid but this must be built on as we go into recovery.
15. Care Leavers are a particularly vulnerable group of young people. Irrefutably, coronavirus, increases this vulnerability, because Care Leavers are frequently financially vulnerable and at significant risk of increased levels of anxiety and isolation. All decisions about Care Leavers' futures must be considered in the light of the pandemic and with the overriding objective of supporting them during this period and minimising any additional stress, which they are likely to suffer from e.g. less contact with significant people in their lives, feeling isolated and the resulting impact on their mental health and well-being. Additional Covid related funding has been accessed to provide care leavers with some of the items that as parents we would provide for our own children. 'Is it Good Enough for My Child?' Mark Riddell OBE the National Implementation Adviser for Care Leavers is advising Middlesbrough about how to improve our work with our Care Leavers.
16. At the current time there is considerable focus on rolling our Middlesbrough's social care Practice Model Children and Relationships First' and our Practice Standards. These will be reported on in more detail in the next update report.

Leadership and Management

17. The Children's Services '**Middlesbrough Children Matter**' website was launched on 27th November 2020 and has been well received by our Middlesbrough Children, our Children's Services workforce our corporate colleagues and our partners. The overarching aim is that this website will help us connect with Middlesbrough Children so we can then use it to evidence how much they matter to us. Our vision is **Showing**

Middlesbrough Children that they matter. The website address is <https://middlesbroughchildrenmatter.co.uk>

18. The Corporate Parenting Strategy was accepted at a meeting of the Corporate Parenting Board on 14th December. Workshops have taken place with partners from the Virtual School, Adoption Tees Valley (our Regional Adoption Agency), Commissioning and Legal Services, to develop the action plans to support roll out of the strategy. The strategy is to be presented to a meeting of the Executive for ratification. The Corporate Parenting Board will monitor the progress made against the action plans.
19. The Local Government Association has identified seven enabler for improvement in Children's Service and one of them is 'Engaging and Supporting the Workforce'. We know that there is a great deal of work to do in this area and it has been suggested that we should have started earlier. A Children's Workforce Development Strategy (2021-24) is being developed within a highly structured programme management framework with implementation planned for April 2021. The three themes at the core of our Workforce Development Strategy provide a clear strategic framework for driving improvement, innovation and impact for children; they are understanding our workforce needs, recruiting and retaining our workforce and developing and growing our workforce. In parallel with the development of the strategy, a Workforce Development Programme is overseeing the delivery of our current workforce development priorities supporting the delivery of Middlesbrough's new strategic plan and the improvement plan. The programme board is chaired by Rachel Farnham Director of Children's Care, with significant input from corporate colleagues.
20. The Youth Service tender process has now concluded and the successful providers; The Linx, The Junction and MFC Foundation have commenced their mobilisation process to be up and running ready to deliver services from 1st April 2021. An initial mobilisation meeting has been held separately with each of the three providers for updates on their progress, to answer any queries, check whether they need additional support from MBC and to confirm that they are all on track to meet the target date to start delivery. All providers have confirmed during the meetings that they will be ready to deliver on time and are currently recruiting staff if required and planning for delivery. The successful providers are collaborating with each other to co-ordinate delivery plans and referral criteria to ensure there is no duplication of services and that the youth offer is comprehensive. A key activity moving forwards is to map the full youth service offer across Middlesbrough and for this to be available and publicised on the Middlesbrough Children Matter website for young people to access.

Governance and Partnerships

21. As referred to above in January 2021 Minister Ford accepted our Commissioner's recommendation that Middlesbrough Council continues to be best placed to deliver its children's services. Since that time the commissioner has stepped back from his involvement with Middlesbrough although he will return in May 2021 to gather information for his final report to the minister. The Commissioner's review was combined with a DfE review which will take place separately on a six monthly basis going forward. The DfE has now commissioned an Improvement Adviser called Stuart Smith. Stuart has held several DCS positions the most recent of them being in Calderdale where he was responsible for a successful Children's Service's improvement programme. Stuart is a member of our improvement board and meets regularly with senior leaders.

22. Ofsted were due to carry out a focussed visit with us before the end of March 2021 but as they did not undertake any visits in January because of lockdown Rachel Holden our senior HMI has indicated that the visit will be after March date. However, we continue to prepare for a visit which in reality might take place at any time.

23. The DCS has scheduled a meeting with every director across the council to look at the interdependencies between directorates. So far these discussions are leading to a stronger focus on locality working and the involvement of children and young people in town planning.

What decision is being asked for?

24. That Executive approves the overview of the strategic and operational work undertaken between November 2020 and February 2021 in line with the Children's Services Improvement Action Plan 2020/21.

Why is this being recommended?

25. It is crucial that members of the Executive have a line of sight into the strategic and operational work being undertaken in line with the Children's Services Improvement Action Plan 2020/21.

Other potential decisions and why these have not been recommended

26. No other potential decision at this time.

Impact of recommended decision

Legal

27. As this report does not ask for a decision but is written to give members of the Executive an overview of the work against the Children's Services improvement plan over the last four months there are no additional directly related legal implications. However, improving social work practice will improve compliance with The Children Act 1989, subsequent Children Act legislation and Working Together 2018

Financial

28. As this report does not ask for a decision but is written to give members of the Executive an overview of the work against the Children's Services improvement plan over the last four months there are no additional directly related financial implications. The improvement budget is reported to the monthly Multi-Agency Strategic Improvement Board.

Policy Framework

29. This decision does not have any impact of the council's policy framework.

Equality and Diversity

30. The improvement of children's services should not result in policies and practices that impact inequitably on individual or groups because they hold one or more protected characteristics.

31. Ensuring that services to children and families are effective and appropriate for all including those who hold one or more protected characteristics is a key responsibility for the service and will be monitored at all times as part of the improvement journey.

Risk

32. Risks in relation to the Improvement Plan are reported to the monthly Multi-Agency Strategic Improvement Board

Actions to be taken to implement the decision(s)

33. None however actions against the Improvement Plan are already taken place

Appendices

34. None

Background papers

35. No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

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