

Corporate Parenting Board Local Family Justice Board Presentation

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MIDDLESBROUGH
CHILDREN
MATTER



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CHILDREN
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Middlesbrough
moving forward



**Our mission is to show
Middlesbrough children
that they matter.**

The role of the Local Family Justice Board (LFJB)

The **Family Justice Board** is the primary forum for setting direction for the family justice system and overseeing performance and was set up to improve the performance of the family justice system and to ensure the best possible outcomes for children who come into contact with it.

Local Family Justice Boards (LFJB) were established to support the work of the Family Justice Board by bringing together the key local agencies, including decision makers and front-line staff, to achieve significant improvement in the performance of the family justice system in their local areas.

The LFJB holds meetings on a quarterly basis and is attended by representatives of those that use the family justice system, including Local Authorities (Legal and Childrens Services), members of the judiciary, CAFCASS, private practice, Barristers, and the local police.

There are also subsidiary groups of the LFJB that look at specific areas such as :

- Local Public Law Working Group
- Local Private Law Working Group
- Police Disclosure Working Group

Public Law Working Group –

Recommendations to achieve best practice in the child protection and family justice systems (Published March 2021)

The PLWG was formed, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, to investigate the steep rise in public law cases coming to the Family Court and to offer recommendations for improving the system's ability to address the needs of the children and families.

In broad terms the objectives of the working group were to:

- i. recommend changes to current practice and procedure that may be implemented reasonably swiftly, without the need for primary or secondary legislation;
- ii. make recommendations to provide Best Practice Guidance.

In response to this, the paper, which was over 2 years in the making, was published in March 2021.

As part of the LFJB, Middlesbrough contributed to the paper by providing both an individual and a regional response to the draft recommendation, of which there were 47 interim recommendations, and 15 longer term recommendations.

In addition to the main paper, Best Practice Guidance was produced for the following areas:

1. Support for and work with families prior to Court Proceedings
2. Section 20/section 76 accommodation
3. The application and case management
4. Special Guardianship Orders

In response to the recommendations, and the Best Practice Guidance, the LA have set up a working group across Legal Services and Children's services to analyse the points, and where required, agree actions to implement.

Local Public Law Working Group

There is a local public law working group which works collaboratively to identify issues that affected the local family justice system in regards to public law matters and to agree practical proposals to resolve.

Representatives from both Legal and Childrens Services attend and actively engage in the work carried out.

Most recent Project: Care Orders at Home – further to which three workshop sessions were held:-

The session was aimed at those working within the family justice system across Cleveland and South Durham

The sessions were agreed as part of the Local Family Justice Board to explore why in the Teesside area we have higher numbers of Care Orders with children placed at home or with connected carers

Aim: To work together to understand when we think Care Order's at home would be appropriate but also when we may challenge each other about this

Understand what the law tells us about Care Orders at home including what can and can't be done under a Care Order

Consider alternatives and specifically the Teesside Supervision Order policy

The outcome of the sessions will be fed back to the LFJB group to seek approval/agreement to any recommendations.

The next project for the Local Public Law working group is to be decided upon consideration of the contents of the recent March 201 paper.

Middlesbrough Legal Services Childrens Team

Middlesbrough Council has an in-house team of lawyers who provide legal advice and support to children's services to carry out their statutory responsibilities.

Ann-Marie Wilson – Head of Legal Services (People)

1 x Senior Childrens Adviser (Part time)

4 x full time Solicitors

1 x trainee Solicitor

4 x Legal Assistants

1 x Court Progression Manager

How can the Legal Services Childrens Team support improvements?

Overall objectives in terms of how the Legal Department can support Children's Services:-

- Be pro active rather than reactive by way of becoming involved in providing timely advice in regards to the decision making process rather than waiting for a crisis to occur
- Work collaboratively together from an early stage to resolve issues and provide support to the department.

Examples of how this can be done:

- Attendance at effective legal planning/gateway panel
- Provide early advice when issues arise/attendance at Strategy meetings
- Attend early legal planning meetings
- To read draft documents such as assessments, statements, and care plans before they are filed and raise any issues in a timely manner
- Provide training to SWs ie around around threshold/risk, case law developments
- Input into strategies suggested by Children's Services
- Have regular reviews for cases which are in Court with the allocated fee earner
- Have a Care Planning meeting 2 weeks following issue, and 4 weeks before the final evidence is to be filed to consider all options based upon the evidence available, and the contingency plans.
- Have a clear escalation process in place for issues of challenge.

Progress - Bloom Project/Cygnnet

There have been issues with increased demand and reduced capacity across the Legal Services Legal Team and as a result LMT agreed to commission a 12 month Managed Project Service to support the team until March 2022.

Further to a procurement process – the project was awarded to Cygnnet Family Law. **This means that a number of public law cases will be outsourced to Cygnnet family law.**

The impact of this is that with increased capacity the Children’s legal team can contribute effectively to improving the quality of outcomes and supporting Children’s Services as outlined.

This will also allow time for future development work to be completed which will strengthen in-house delivery.

Progress - Court Progression Manager (CPM)

As part of the improvement work connected to Ofsted, there was an identified need to bridge the gap between the Childrens Team in Legal, and Children's Services, and to improve the quality of court proceedings.

The purpose of this new role:

To act as lead officer, working closely with Legal and Children's services, to ensure the timely progression of cases in family court proceedings.

Key functions of the role:

- lead an effective partnership between Legal and Children's Services
- use expert communications skills to develop a shared understanding of objectives across both Legal and Children's Services
- working externally to develop and maintain relationships with the local judiciary to ensure practice standards are continuously met.
- responsible for a measurable improvement in the quality of court documentation
- to develop, implement and deliver a case quality framework and bespoke practice development to ensure Social Workers have the requisite skills to produce quality evidence
- act competently as a Social Work lead in formal case proceedings.
- manage the progress of pre proceedings cases to identify/take action to deal with any potential/actual exceptions that might jeopardise the achievement of required milestones,

Invest to save:

The improvements sought will achieve better outcomes for children in a more timely manner, and therefore reduce costs by way of resources, for example improving quality of evidence – plans being right first time, reducing the need for further hearings, saving time for legal and Childrens services

The successful candidate has been appointed and will commence the role in May 2021.

Middlesbrough Context

Middlesbrough currently have 128 sets of active proceedings in court involving 229 children:

- 101 care proceedings
- 9 adoptions
- 12 Discharge of Care Orders/SGOs
- 3 Deprivation on Liberty applications
- 1 Female Genital Mutilation Order
- 1 Revocation of a Placement Order
- 1 Section 34.4 Order to suspend contact

Progress to Date:

702 Children were in Middlesbrough care in August 2020.

In the last six months we had 66 children have become Looked after children and 172 Children ceased to be looked after children. There are currently 563 children looked after.

In the last 6 months social care and legal have worked together to ensure that:

- 36 children have secured permanence and ceased to be looked after through the granting of a Special Guardianship Order.
- 26 children were made subject to adoption orders in the period between August 2020 and 31 March 2021. This is a 62.5% improvement on the full previous year score card. This equates to 5% of the current CIC Cohort.
- The number of children placed with parents has reduced from a high of 99 children in August 2020 to 68 in April 2021. In the past 6 months 21 children have ceased to be in a placement with parent arrangement due to revocation of a Care Order.

This has supported the reduction in the number of children looked after.

Innovate – Commissioned Service

In Phase 1 Innovate were allocated 17 children in PwP placements.

Of the 17 young people allocated:

- 13 children now have secured permanence and Care Orders have been revoked.
- 1 application for revocation has been filed to court and a sibling group of 3 were assessed as unsuitable for revocation.
- To date Innovate have commenced 10 new placements with parent placements through work that they have been doing with children in connected carers placements and in residential care. Whilst this has increased the number of children in PWP placements these are positive moves for the children and will be closely monitored through the project and PMG to ensure revocation is progressed swiftly where appropriate.
- Progress will be tracked and there will be ongoing review with the legal services to progress through revocations proceedings in a swift manner.