

12 month review report into Children's Services in Middlesbrough

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Services**

July 2021

Middlesbrough Children and Young People’s Services: Commissioner 12 month follow-up report

1. Context:

1.1 This report provides further summary analysis of progress being made at Middlesbrough in addressing the significant weaknesses in practice identified through an Ofsted inspection of their services published in January 2020. At that point, the LA and its partners were assessed, in respect of childrens services, to be “inadequate” against all judgements. The full report is accessible at <https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50143726>.

1.2 This systemic failure necessitated the statutory appointment by the DfE of a Commissioner. In my original report, I recognised the strengths in the response made by new senior leaders both political and managerial across the LA and its partners. I therefore recommended in May 2020, that the introduction of an alternative delivery model could serve only to disrupt the improvement programme which was firmly in place. This recommendation was accepted, with the usual expectations of a 6 and 12 month review by the Commissioner and that the independent Chair of the Improvement Board would provide regular updates to the Minister. It was also agreed in May 2020, that I would retain some ongoing involvement through to the 6 month review stage given the complexity faced of delivering improvement through COVID.

1.3 In my 6 month review report of November 2020 whilst highlighting areas for further improvement, I also confirmed that:

“A calmer focused systematic and informed approach is being taken based on good, trusted analysis and by leaders working better together on a partnership basis. Delivery against the improvement plan has been good but the delivery of marked improvements in the consistent quality of local practice remains a significant challenge”.

1.4 This 12 month review report was deferred, with the agreement of all parties, by 2 months as the original timing clashed with an Ofsted assurance visit. The short delay has also enabled this report to incorporate key feedback arising from that Ofsted activity. This report and its findings have also benefitted greatly from the insights of the DfE appointed Improvement Advisor Stuart Smith who has been working closely and effectively with the LA and partners over the past 6 month period.

2. Further updates by others since the November Commissioner report:

2.1 In his most recent update on 1 May 2021 to the Minister, the Chair of the Improvement Board (John Pearce DCS Durham) described how in his assessment: “Middlesbrough has put in place the foundations required for an effective improvement programme”.

2.2 He highlighted, in particular, the establishment of a permanent leadership team well supported politically and corporately, a good performance and planning infrastructure enabling a detailed understanding of progress and the issues facing

the area and an improvement plan covering all key areas with governance in place to track progress and challenges through to the Improvement Board.

2.3 At the same time he described how Middlesbrough continues to face a number of challenges due to starting from such a low base and the added challenge of delivery through Covid. He was keen to see still further impact of partnership work, better understanding and management of high levels of demand and the impact that has on capacity and quality and a further embedding and sustaining of the improvements made to date.

2.4 Across the country **Ofsted** have been undertaking COVID related assurance visits to all LAs where performance concerns exist. These assurance visits look at practice through a wider lens than is usually the case when Ofsted conduct monitoring visits. In that context, Ofsted conducted a remote assurance visit of Middlesbrough on the 26 and 27 May 2021. Their conclusions included the following strengths amongst others:

“Since the inspection in December 2019, senior leaders have been engaged in a comprehensive programme of improvement. Leaders have a good understanding of what they have achieved and of what more there is to do.

The multi-agency children’s hub (MACH) has continued to build on the improvements that had been identified at the monitoring visit in August 2020. Children’s risks and needs are identified through a thorough screening process that is timely and proportionate.

Children are seen regularly, and throughout the pandemic social workers have taken into account specific COVID-19 safety plans when planning their visits. Some social workers are creative and persistent in their engagement with children, despite the restrictions imposed by lockdown measures. This direct work with children is demonstrably making a difference to their lives.

Strategic and operational partners work together effectively to identify exploitation risks and trends for children in their communities. The tracking of children who are at risk of or who are being exploited continues until the risk is sufficiently reduced. There are clear and comprehensive procedures in place for children who are missing from home or care.”

2.5 At the same time Ofsted highlighted a number of agreed areas for improvement including:

“Senior leaders know, through their own audits, that too much work is still being evaluated as poor and not meeting their own expectations regarding the quality of practice.

The quality of social workers’ assessments of children’s needs varies. In the poorer assessments, the direct work with children is not contributing to a clear understanding of what life is like for them. Plans for children that are made following an assessment of need also vary in quality.

Management oversight and actions to ensure that vulnerable children and children in care, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), receive their full educational entitlement.

The understanding of identity and the diverse needs of children and their families to inform assessment, planning and support.”

Importantly the areas for development identified by Ofsted matched the self-assessment of the LA.

3. July 2021 Commissioner 12 Month Review: Process:

3.1 For this 12-month review, I have had well organised access to a range of key strategic documentation and performance reports including all papers for recent meetings of the Improvement Board. I have also undertaken a number of individual interviews with key leaders including political leaders and have held focus groups looking at key areas including QA and Performance; Workforce Development and Practice; and Partnership working.

3.2 In addition, I have held (with Stuart Smith DfE Advisor) focus groups with front line social work staff and a separate session with frontline managers. I have benefitted greatly from discussions with Stuart Smith (DfE Advisor), John Pearce (Independent Chair of the Improvement Board); Edwina Harrison (current Chair of Multi Agency Safeguarding Arrangements); Sam Morrison (DfE) and with LGA staff supporting the LA.

3.3 Headline feedback from this 12 month review was provided to the LA on Friday 16 July 2021.

4. July 2021 Commissioner 12 Month Review: Analysis

I have structured this feedback, as previously, broadly against elements of the “enablers for improvement” commonly recognised and used by the DfE.

4.1 Leadership and Management

In the November Commissioner review report we said:

Whilst political and managerial leadership has been secured and enhanced this progress needs to be both maintained and extended. The maturity of member engagement needs ongoing support including from the LGA and greater stability is now essential at all levels of the LA leadership structure.

The recent period has witnessed significant political leadership change. Resignations of key cabinet members including the Deputy Mayor/Executive Member for Children has disrupted considerable work undertaken over the past year in equipping already inexperienced cabinet members who have now departed.

The resulting political arrangements have since changed again, which now sees a new Executive Member for Education, the Mayor taking direct responsibility for childrens social care and a new Chair of the Corporate Parenting Board. Good political leadership of the childrens agenda matters and the work to establish that in Middlesbrough has been significantly disrupted. In the short-term there is nothing to suggest the current position will impact on the leadership and financial commitment to the service and indeed the Mayor’s direct involvement could create new championing opportunities. The current arrangements if allowed to continue could

destabilise the progress made, reduce the level of engagement by members, confuse political accountability and weaken the support to the service provided by elected members. The Mayor is aware of this and is taking steps to get the right person into the Executive Member for children role. New members for children and education would also benefit from the LGA development and mentoring programme.

A stable credible leadership team within the LA and with partners have made further significant strides in enhancing the quality of their analysis, their shared understanding of their communities and their response to the children and families of those communities. This is then leading to activity including enhancing the provision of early help activity particularly in areas of greatest need.

The work on understanding demand and future projections is of a very impressive nature, sophisticated enough to incorporate the challenges of analysing legacy issues whilst also incorporating ongoing COVID related impacts. The quality and clarity of this analysis and forecasting work enhances leadership credibility and corporate support and engagement in improvement activity. The work has considerable potential to meet the ambition of joining improvement and financial strategies in a comprehensive Medium-Term Financial Forecast for childrens services.

The “Middlesbrough Children Matter” branding developed through young people’s voice activity, is at the heart of key strategic documentation, organisational conversations and is used creatively via social media. It appears to be proving an engaging ambitious and unifying catalyst for change.

Key strategic documents are in place which combine a rich and systematic use of data analysis with a consistent style and narrative underpinned by shared principles and some great graphics. This strategic coherence must support effective delivery.

Within the directorate we continue to see a far greater sense of a single children and young people’s service operating collectively and without the historic silos. There continues to be a similar and important sense of a one council approach and a greater language about place rather than organisation. The Chief Executive is directly chairing a corporate reference group charged with ensuring full cross council engagement and understanding of the childrens improvement agenda. The group also has ambitions to widen that engagement into a wider pledge/commitment for all children – such a “child friendly city” style approach is welcomed but will require full engagement of members and the wider partnership via the Childrens Trust.

Leaders of Childrens services are more open in engaging with external sources than previously. They are more visibly engaged in regional and sub regional activity and keen to continue working with others e.g. North Yorkshire in the interests of improvement. Plans for a LGA peer review of the Virtual School is another example of this. It is encouraging to see local practice around the COVID response also being profiled by key national organisations like the What Works Centre.

4.2 Strategic Partnership Approach

In the November Commissioner review report, we said:

1. Significant progress has been made in partnership working and operational improvement has been recognised. Perhaps more could be done to ensure that delivery of the improvement plan does not simply revert to LA led improvement activity observed by others.
2. In the complexity of strategic partnership working the links between the children and young people's agenda and the local Health and Wellbeing board appears underdeveloped. Similarly, new Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements (MASA) across South Tees appear in their infancy and proposals for a new independent scrutineer role needs to complement rather than duplicate the current improvement board agenda.
3. Whilst communication routes within the LA have been enhanced the opportunities to improve communication across the wider childrens workforce on a partnership basis appears less developed.
4. As described above exciting opportunities are at hand but must be operationalised to further enhance the MACH through the injection of additional capacity most notably through the police. Given the significance of domestic violence this is particularly welcomed but must be delivered.

The Improvement Board continues to prove highly effective. It is well chaired, well attended and accesses focused and high-quality analysis on progress against the improvement plan. Exception report and rag rating of actions is well established. Its agenda enables deep dive activity into areas of particular concern or interest to the Board without losing its primary focus on delivery against the Improvement Plan.

There are welcome and advanced plans to enhance the Improvement Board through the engagement of additional members including the DASS, the Chair/Independent Scrutineer from MASA, housing and the VCS.

A chair/ independent scrutineer has been appointed into the Multi Agency Safeguarding Arrangements (MASA) (South Tees Safeguarding Children Partnership) and this is bringing real energy, expertise and optimism that greater strategic alignment of the key strategic forums work can be delivered. Greater confidence that improved partnership focus and governance is possible regardless of the geographic areas covered by bodies.

Under this new leadership the MASA has already held 2 major conferences and this may provide a useful model with the Improvement Board for further enhancing engagement and understanding on a partnership basis of improvement activity.

A combination of new leadership culture and possibly COVID requirements have had the impact of bringing partners closer together and many examples of much improved relationships were described for example between LA and the local school

community with the voice of education said to be more regularly heard and schools better supported to embrace wider responsibilities for vulnerable learners. Partners frequently described to me the openness and accessibility of known leaders who respond and deliver. One headteacher said she believed all others would agree that “our voice is valued” by leaders who “always get back” and who now “listen and engage”. At the same time this high support to partners was matched by “high challenge” with agencies described as being appropriately “held to account more”.

Leaders within childrens services in the LA are said to have also played a key role in enhancing the profile, practice standards and improving outcomes through their engagement with external bodies eg Adoption Agency and MARAC.

Frontline staff and their managers in LA services describe positive partnership working in many areas – much improved school engagement; excellent strategy meeting attendance; great housing and NEET pathways for care leavers; good engagement with police and creative ways to frequently monitor young people on the edge of school/missing have been created.

It does feel that opportunities are at hand to even further change the language of partnership working across the local authority area. A chance to move beyond the historic narrative around inward focused organisations, to put to one side frustrations that some may hold about earlier decision making eg MACH disaggregation or chair appointments and move to more mature and lived partnership behaviours where openness, transparency and trust can be ever more consistently rekindled. There is an incredible appetite for this and plenty of excellent examples of collaborative operational practice from which to build.

The partnership front door MACH continues to receive positive endorsement from both external inspection and internal audit processes. The police have followed through on committing additional capacity within the service and a triage system for the high volume of domestic abuse notifications has now been established. An ongoing debate on whether all such notifications need to enter this route may benefit from external support. Shared language around police domestic abuse notifications and whether they are contacts or referrals is urgently required.

4.3 Workforce

In the November Commissioner review report, we said:

1. Whilst there have been discrete areas of activity against the workforce development agenda the need for a comprehensive Workforce Strategy is now fully recognised.
2. The ambition for this to incorporate a consolidated staff offer, a rich learning and development package, a comprehensive approach to recruitment and retention, a greater understanding of demand and therefore required skills/structure is really welcome and progress must be prioritised.

3. This work should also see the needed clarity on the local Practice Model and associated practice toolkits being delivered. The LA is also keen to review elements of its work around the voice of the child to see greater engagement in key planning and support forums.

The LA has provided the required stability and quality of senior and middle leadership during the recent period. There is clear evidence of trusted high-quality relationships between LA leaders essential to further progress improvements within children's services.

There is now an approved, impressive Strategic Workforce Development Strategy with themes covering organisational design, recruitment and retention and workforce training and development. The sophistication and ambition displayed in the modelling work is really exceptional. The strategy is clearly aligned with other strategic activity and has impressively sequenced ambitions and desired outcomes. Work is advanced on finalising the approach and determining the financial implications of the approach to enhance recruitment and retention in key roles.

The new Learning and Development Programme contained within the above is providing more consistent induction, a clear ASYE offer, core training linked to improvement priorities, a multiagency offer around Early Help and thresholds and additional development training plus discrete managers programme. The learning and development approach now includes flexibility to respond to team specific needs arising from audit and, identified needs can be promptly responded to through "hot topic" style briefings. The offer and its responsive nature is positively described by frontline staff and managers with the only barrier to engagement apparently that of time in some areas. A call for some "hot topic" spots to be moved to the mandatory list will be welcomed in some quarters and may help prioritisation. It was also excellent to hear staff using the experience of apprentices in the service to reshape approaches and language eg on missing education.

The LA has made some progress in reducing the use of agency social work staff including agency managers but there is still too many and the quality of agency staffing available is recognised as one of the barriers to more consistent improvements in practice. The LA continues to use managed teams as an alternative model and investments made currently in the assessment function has proved effective in reducing caseloads without increasing throughput to other parts of the service. The timeline for moving to a "steady state" in resourcing is under development and will require finalising, approval and clear communication.

To enhance recruitment and retention the Workforce Development Strategy workstream has developed innovative options for an enhanced recruitment offer through welcome and retention payment scheme. At the same time a new specialist recruitment process and new website is about to be launched.

The outcomes from last years Annual Health check of the views of social workers made mixed reading albeit understandable in the context of the improvement journey. Whilst scoring highly for being cared for by managers and the organisation,

comparisons with others saw lower feedback scores around workload, access to regular and reflective supervision and understanding of the practice model. At that stage only half of social workers would recommend the organisation as a social work employer. Impressively the feedback has not been hidden but used and, at the Practice Week clear open messages were given about what actions were being taken to address the challenges made.

Whilst for many areas caseloads have now reduced, there are still areas (20%) where individual caseloads are above desired levels. An understandable focus on key pathways and Ofsted recommendations has inevitably meant that other teams eg children with disability are perhaps behind the pace of elsewhere in the organisation. Reductions in the numbers of children in care and on plans has enabled the IRO service to have manageable caseloads in line with national guidance and enhance their engagement in all key decision-making processes.

When we met social workers and frontline managers we heard positive feedback on the organisation culture and visible credible leadership. They positively recognised that enhanced management capacity and smaller teams has led to improvements in the levels of supervision, support and case management oversight at all tiers of the organisation. Staff also recognise the priority given to retention with additional career opportunities being created through, for example Practice Champion roles and through expansion of the frontline programme. Whilst supervision procedures have been updated and frequency is good, further work to increase reflective supervision and supervision around the quality of practice rather than pure compliance is now needed.

4.4 Practice Improvement and Innovation:

In the November Commissioner review report, we said:

1. Leaders have been rightly cautious about committing additional resources into a service where deficits in practice and management of that practice exist. They have been keen to have a sharper sense of genuine demand and subsequent capacity needed. Whilst legacy issues and COVID implications may still blur that analysis, there is sufficient evidence now available to fully justify further investment to enhance capacity. Caseloads are too high and must be reduced. At the same time developed work to better understand the nature of demand in an attempt to reshape the profile of interventions should be maintained.

2 The LA have clear opportunities with the further investment described above but must ensure the extra resources are targeted wisely. Used to reshape the workforce structure in the direction not always of current demand but in a way which creates capacity which matches the preferred practice model and philosophy. Additional targeted investment will also remain welcomed to address historic practice deficiencies ie out of authority placements and creativity should be possible to enable bespoke practice expertise to be mainstreamed over time.

3. Too many children are in care and too many are placed inappropriately elsewhere. The new approved strategy needs to be supported by detailed

implementation plans which ensure that such a statement is of historic rather than current relevance. The proposed further investment in the Innovate team on out of authority placements; the further embedding of the opportunities through Future for Families and the potential for further work with North Yorkshire on reviewing the local fostering offer are all welcome and require follow through.

Practice Weeks are used creatively by the organisation. In March 2021, a rich menu of short presentations by external speakers were alongside internal inputs. The programme was aligned with improvement priorities and saw very high engagement (over 1000 attendances) and strong feedback was received.

The integrated line management of Early Help within the same portfolio is adding real value. A historically stable reflective and effective service has enhanced its role and brings strong evidence of impact. Step down is used effectively as cases come from childrens social care and good handover arrangements are in place. There are also new innovative developments within early help funded creatively with the VCS eg Seen Heard Believed (trauma informed practice)

Progress has now been made in finalising the Corporate Parenting Strategy (which incorporates permanence and sufficiency); in developing and launching a comprehensive Early Help strategy and action plan; in jointly drafting an impressive and coherent Learning and Education Strategy which goes out to consultation this month, and a detailed comprehensive Learning and Development Programme which is now in place.

Within the permanency strategy considerable progress has been made in the tracking and oversight of children within the care system. This has led to impressive performance in timely moves for more children into adoptive placements and a significant increase in the use of special guardianship etc. We also see evidence of more appropriate use of PLO, a reduction in emergency hearings and a stronger relationship of trust is described with CAFCASS.

The Audit to Excellence programme has now been rolled out across the whole service with team plans/performance clinics and non-negotiables in place with strong endorsement of the approach across the service. Audit completion are 100% in some areas eg early help and, whilst more progress is needed in some areas the Audit to Excellence capacity has been extended for a further 12 month period to support embedding and extension of this highly impressive model.

It is encouraging to see further innovation and investment in challenging times. 2006-14 had seen the closure of much youth service provision in Middlesbrough and whilst some targeted activity continued, it was short term funded and lacked a strategic and aligned approach. April 2021 saw the new Youth Service go live with innovative commissioned services providing universal, targeted and transition provision. All contracts are closely aligned with Middlesbrough Childrens Matter principles and priorities and with clear organisational links to MACH and early help arrangements. Governance of new provision is through the Partnership and Prevention Board. April

also saw the launch of new trauma informed therapeutic service for 4-18 year olds who have witnessed traumatising Domestic Abuse.

Under the governance of the Childrens Trust, the LA is cautiously exploring models for enhancing and integrating provision at a local level. Ambitions to develop locality teams around targeted communities (Newport and N Ormesby); local pilots of school based social work staff (Park End) and ideas around direct supervision of designated school safeguarding leads are under discussion. This is welcome with recognised care needed that pilot activity does not result in fragmentation and confusion.

The Practice Model (Children and Relationships First) is clear, well communicated and increasingly well understood. It has been introduced through open and engaging dialogue and its profile is maintained in a number of innovative ways eg use of audit and champions. Behind the high level principles of the model sit developed practice standards and a rich raft of direct work tools. The dialogue on practice is ongoing with clear links back from practitioners via the PSW to the DCS and a really creative “courageous conversations” model of exchange between senior leaders with operational managers.

The service continues to work with North Yorkshire and a current workstream around the fostering service is clearly needed. The service is needing to resolve legacy issues whilst at the same time developing a new offer to attract new carers. In the interim the service has a reduced number of net carers. Care is also needed that the ambitious advanced plans for enhancing the residential care offer are also matched with the ability to resource and recruit high quality staffing. With these issues combined, the LA runs the risk of seeing children continuing to live in more costly IFA placements and in at least local residential care but in provision less well prepared to meet need.

It was suggested to us that progress in developing a wider range of commissioned services to support core social work activity whilst welcomed, may be at risk of leading to a plethora of referral processes and subsequently unnecessary delay and duplication. There are models of resource panels etc being used elsewhere to streamline and enhance access to the right service for the right child which could be considered.

4.5 What difference is being made?

In looking at recent performance report and analysis it is impressive to see that :

- Assessment timeliness has significantly improved from 76% in September 2020 to 95% currently and some evidence from audit of improved quality.
- 95% of child in need cases have been reviewed within timescale.
- 15% reduction of numbers of children on child protection plans with a 28% reduction of ICPCs in the past 6 months.
- The care population is down from a peak of 702 (August 2020) to 539 currently – in the last 6 months there have been 66 admissions and 172 have left care.
- Connected carer figures are down from 210 Sept 2020 to 119 currently.

- 34% reduction in children Placed with Parents.
- 40% of closed social care involvements result in step down to early help.
- 42% increase in cases in early help and the service able to evidence 78% of early help cases closed with positive outcomes.
- Targets for the Supporting Families/Troubled Families programme have been fully met 1027 attached to the programme and £312K reward funding claimed.
- Work to safely return children from external foster and residential care is delivering – including 4 children returned home from residential care with support at a saving of £1.4M annually. 34 of 40 children in community supported by Futures for Families remained at home.
- Good accommodation offer for care leavers and dedicated CAMHS worker and independence programme in leaving care.
- Good attendance reported at strategy meetings.
- Improved performance in children seen in assessments.
- Evidence that supervision levels have improved.
- Audit is evidencing and some evidence of very strong practice on voice of child and management oversight.

Performance concerns

- Inadequate practice is reducing although still at 22%
- Although improving from a low base, rereferral rates are too high
- Dental checks are too low (covid related issue)
- Family Group Conference numbers not where desired and model not embedded
- Pathway plans in place are low and audit says quality not good enough
- The timeliness of ICPCs
- Whilst average caseloads are fine at 19 some staff are said to be in high 20s – 19% have 26-30
- Early Help caseloads too high at 28
- Quality of PEPs is variable
- Quality of life story work variable
- Private fostering low numbers
- ICPCs – actions not SMART enough
- Single agency lead professionals have improved but more needed
- Agency staffing is too high and it creates too many changes of worker

5. Recommendations

1. The high quality of forecasting, analysis and service redesign work should provide the necessary confidence to move into an ambitious Medium Term Financial Plan which will fund activity where needed and desired rather than the historic use of funding on reactive activity which was neither desired nor consistently effective. This work however must be further progressed, finalised and the approach and financial implications approved.

2. Further reductions in the numbers of inadequate cases are needed. This will be achieved by maintaining and embedding existing high-quality activity. The potential for distraction through too many further new initiatives should be avoided. Progress will be made by doing even more of the same - consistent credible leaders leading a joined-up organisation supported well corporately, which prioritises a practice model, understood and delivered by permanent practitioners operating with great managerial support and manageable workloads.

3. There are many improvements in partnership working evident in the LA and, a further enhancement of the Improvement Board including improved engagement and leadership of MASA arrangements should help strengthen links between the key statutory agencies. Planned new members of the Improvement Board and increased joint activity between the Improvement Board and MASA must be implemented. The partnership tension surrounding triage of domestic abuse cases must be resolved and LA leaders must move into a style of partnership engagement which is more inclusive and consultative.

4. As described earlier the current political leadership arrangements need to be enhanced with additional capacity introduced and training for key roles identified. As the statutory guidance says

“The DCS and Lead Member Children’s Services (LMCS) roles provide a clear and unambiguous line of political and professional accountability for children’s well-being. The DCS and LMCS should report to the Chief Executive and to the Council Leader or Mayor”. And whilst no specific reference is made to the Lead member role the guidance is clear that “it is not appropriate for the Chief Executive also to hold the statutory role of DCS (except possibly as a temporary measure)”

Whilst I am fully reassured that the current arrangements do not present any immediate risk to further progress, a recommendation will be made to the Minister for the Mayor to provide an update within a 3 month period on progress in establishing the required informed political leadership in line with this statutory guidance.

5. The need for less reliance on agency staffing and managed teams is recognised and the work on the Medium Term Financial Plan must create a detailed timeline for progress. The plan must be underpinned by effective delivery against the Workforce Development Strategy.

6. Whilst supervision procedures have been updated and frequency is good, further work to increase reflective supervision and supervision around the quality of practice rather than pure compliance is now needed.

7. It is encouraging to see a prioritisation in improvement of the local fostering service but externally supported work is required. More local high quality placements are needed, equipped to provide greater placement choice and to support the appropriate return of children placed elsewhere to the local

authority area. At the same time planned enhancements to residential care placements locally must be matched by skilled, stable staffing to care for those with most complex needs.

8. The LA should seek to reduce complexity in frontline staff accessing new services whether directly delivered or commissioned from others. Ease of speedy access for the right service for the right child should be the aim.

9. Whilst much progress has been made, the performance challenges highlighted at section at Section 4.5 of this report must be prioritised.

10. The impressive ambition to locate improvements in childrens social care in the context of wider improvements in outcomes and choices for all children, young people and their families will need translation into effective delivery routes.

6. Summary

Considerable progress has been made and there is evidence of real impact. Most impressively in the face of significant demand and need, the LA has tackled legacy issues which had inflated the volume of cases in higher tiers of provision. Significant reductions in the care population have been achieved through a focus on permanency and supporting families locally and important reductions in children on child protection plans and within social care generally have taken place. The LA knows itself well and has clearly moved beyond having “the necessary building blocks” in place to an organisation impacting on outcomes and progressing impressively on their improvement journey.

On this basis, I would recommend to the Minister that no further direct engagement of an appointed Commissioner is required and continued monitoring and support to improvement is afforded by the Advisor and core DfE team.

Peter Dwyer CBE

DfE Commissioner

Middlesbrough