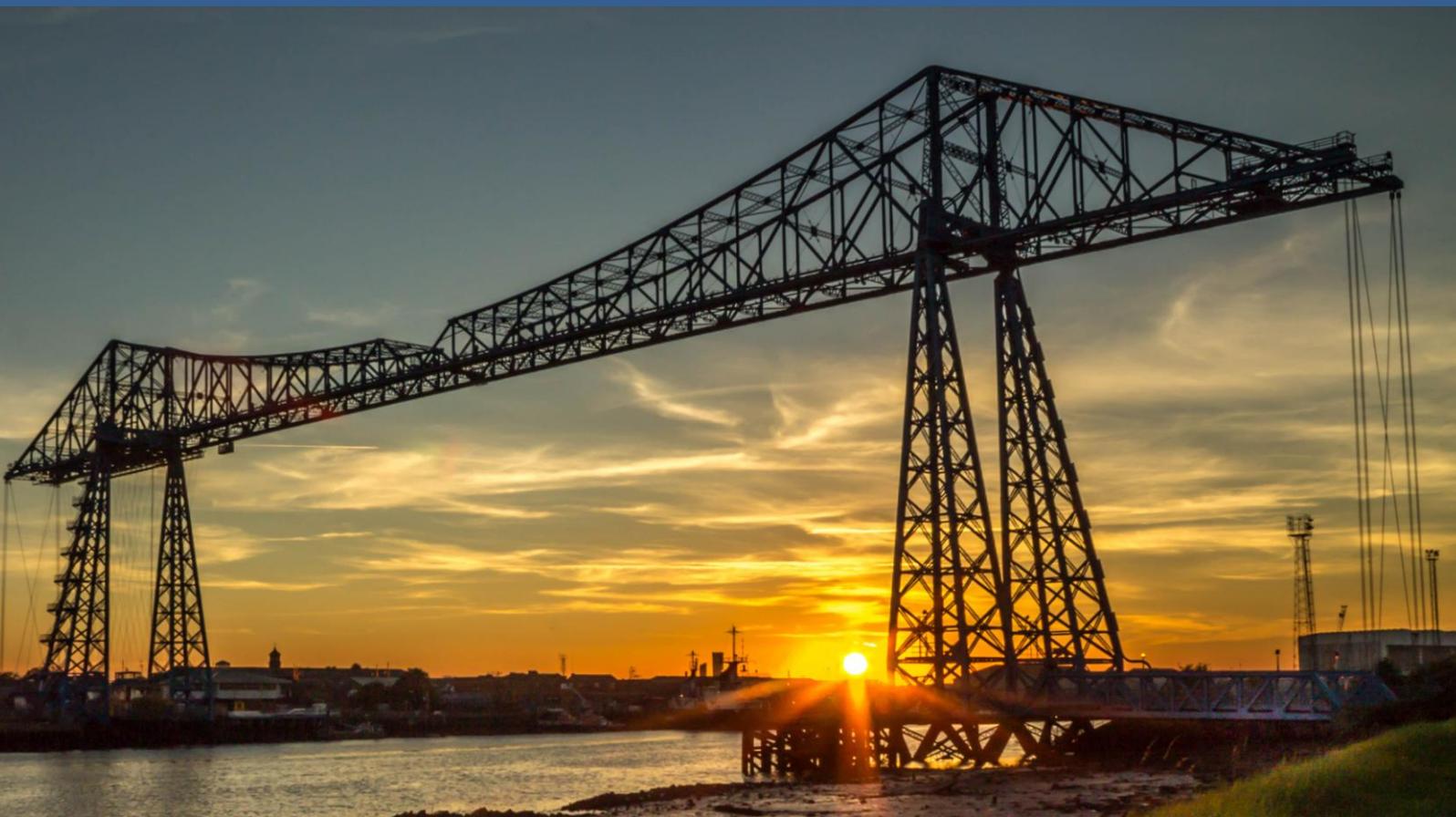


Returning Children to Middlesbrough



Briefing Paper
January 2015

The Returning Children to Middlesbrough Project

There are some talented and dedicated social workers in Middlesbrough – protecting children and trying where possible to keep families together. The significant numbers of looked after children and the lack of a ‘mechanism’ to allow a more fluid use of resources can lead sometimes to ‘placementitis’. A child or young person is successfully placed in foster care or residential care and everything is often fine, the placement meets their needs and they thrive. For some however, for a host of reasons, the placement breaks down and in order to keep the child safe and often in a crisis situation another placement is found. For some children and young people, this cycle of placements escalates in distance from home, degree of ‘control’ and often cost. For a young person who may have entered the ‘looked after’ system because of an unstable, fractured relationship at home, their experience of the looked after system can appear to be a series of further fractured relationships.

The rationale behind the Returning Children to Middlesbrough Project for each child is;

- It would be safe and in their interests to return them home
- They would be willing to work towards achieving this
- Their families would be willing to work towards achieving this
- Those professionals working with the child/young person or their family see this as a positive way forward.

What have we tried?

We have worked with 18 young people, their families and professionals involved in their lives. Here are a few examples;

Amy

Amy has had a troubled childhood, leading to her becoming looked after by the local authority. Throughout this she has retained contact with her mother, although this relationship has at times been difficult. Amy has experienced a range of services, from foster care to residential children’s homes, moving on when she became ‘difficult’. Her most recent residential placement broke down when the staff at the home found it increasingly difficult to support her and following an incident involving the police stated that they could not support her any longer – Amy was gathering a reputation for being difficult, challenging and in need of ‘specialist’ residential provision.

The use of Individual Budgets enabled Amy to return home to her mother’s house, with a package of support designed around her, building on her skills and interests – the package of support includes one-to-one support from the Home Support Team, purchasing horse riding equipment to enable her to take advantage of ‘free’ support at a local stables and incentives to attend (and walk to) school. 10 months on Amy has transformed from an angry, uncooperative girl into a confident, likeable young woman – attending and achieving at school, building on her interests and rebuilding a relationship with her mother and wider family.

A placement in a specialist residential school would cost Middlesbrough Council £3,000 per week. In 10 months this would amount to £120,000. Her current package of support costs £299 per week £11,960 over 10 months – a saving of £108,040. There are blips along the way – but that is what the support is there for, to enable Amy and her mother to work through the difficult times to stay together.

Tracy

Tracy has a hard time at home and a hard time in education – difficulties at home led her to being placed in foster care - when the foster carers served notice Tracy moved into her grandparent's house, a good short term solution, but not sustainable and the distance between Tracy and her siblings still living at home was widening.

Tracy's support is designed to enable her to move back home gradually, supporting a move for the family to a larger property, creating opportunities for her and her sister to rebuild their relationship by doing a cookery course together - something they both enjoy. The plan benefits the whole family, the plan includes bedroom furniture, tickets to Middlesbrough FC and is creating opportunities for Tracy to re integrate back into family life, and allowing space for the family to do positive things out of the 'pressure cooker' of a busy home. And hopefully keep the family together and Tracy out of the Looked after System.

Tracy's plan will cost £2,848 over six months, six months in foster care would cost £9,600.

Joe and David

Joe and David and their mother are going through a difficult time, the community around them is also experiencing a difficult time because of the behaviour of Joe, David and their friends. There is intense pressure on all involved, the two boys, their mother and Middlesbrough Council to keep the boys and the community safe. Pressure comes from all sides, poverty, poor housing, the threat of eviction, benefits sanctions, antisocial behaviour - the list goes on.

There is pressure from police, housing and perhaps another 20 professionals to remove the boys into residential care. At the heart of it are two intelligent, gifted boys and a loving mother who is struggling with life and the pressures of complicated parenthood – she has other children 'looked after'. For the Looked after Children's team, it is a tightrope balancing risk – but the belief is that with support, mother can be supported to cope and Joe and David can be encouraged to engage in positive activities which will divert them from the pull of anti social behaviour.

The support around Joe and David includes intensive support for the family from the Home Support team, support from an external agency to engage the boys in boxing and football, practical assistance with making the home feel like a 'home' incentives to attend school and engage in positive activities.

The use of individual budgets in this situation hasn't made the 'tightrope' any easier to walk, but is beginning to show some signs of an improved situation – Joe who professionals say is

'capable of getting to Oxford or Cambridge University' has recently extended his short school day by one and a half hours and is attending more frequently. The boys are engaging in the activities provided and relationships with professionals are being rebuilt.

The manager of the Looked After Children's Team estimates that a specialist residential – placement with education for Joe and David would cost in the region of £800,000 per year. Even if the package of support for them to remain at home costs half of that, it would be worth trying, and if we fail and the boys go into care – we can at least say we tried everything.

Previously this work was supported via Middlesbrough Council's membership of In Control. For 2014/15 we have contracted with New Prospects Association (Tim Keilty) to support the work. Since April 2014 we have spent £3,200 on support from New Prospects – less than a week's charge for a young person in residential care, this is not 'extra' cost – it comes out of the placement budget.

What have we learned?

The approach works well if we stick to the rationale above; plans which have not come to fruition have involved situations where families did not particularly want their children home. The approach is not suited to 'crisis' situations – as careful, detailed planning is difficult when 28 days notice is served.

The use of individual budgets is not a magic wand - Young people are placed in the care of the local authority for a host of reasons, often complicated situations for complicated children, the use of Individual Budgets does allow for different solutions but does not remove complexity.

The success of Individual budgets for looked after children relies on buy in from all involved, and a hands on approach to making plans a reality, we have learned that Social Workers are too busy to spend time on the practicalities of individual plans, which can lead to plans stalling.

Jill Blackwood, Team Manager, says of the returning Children to Middlesbrough Pilot;

"I was sceptical at first, but the approach adds value to what we do. The aim of children's services is to keep children at home wherever possible. This pilot helps us do that, coming up with creative solutions and makes us think differently about placements and the use of our budget. If we sometimes spend £6000 per week on a placement for a young person miles from their home, why wouldn't we consider spending money to keep them at, or closer to, home? If we do this right it's a win-win situation, in terms of outcomes for young people and use of stretched council budgets"

What are we pleased about?

There are some success stories, and even plans which have 'failed' taught us something - and we are working at returning children home again with a slight change to plans.

Young people and their families are buying in to the process; young people can see tangible elements of the plan which they contribute to becoming a reality. Plans focus on what young people thrive at and enjoy and plans can benefit the whole family – providing space from the stress and strains of life to have positive time together where that has been lacking in the past.

Individual budgets are being used successfully as incentives for young people to settle at home and at school.

The project is starting to attract more appropriate referrals.

We are starting to use individual budgets to 'avoid' residential placements rather than 'return' children from them.

Even for young people who have not returned to the family home, a return to Middlesbrough means that significant savings are made in terms of social workers time and means we can keep a closer eye on the support children and young people receive.

What are we concerned about?

A story is developing that the Returning Children to Middlesbrough Project is 'rewarding bad behaviour' – what we are trying to do is encourage engagement and offer people the chance to grasp something different.

A flood of families approaching children's services demanding an individual budget for 'activities' is unlikely, most families would see the involvement of child protection social workers or someone from the looked after team as something they wanted to avoid at all costs.

Children are still routinely sent to expensive out of area placements (often the best solution, but not always)

What next?

Work towards going live in April 2015.

Continuing to gather evidence and stories of how this approach helps – and being honest when it doesn't.

Exploring a bid via In Control to the Department of Education to bolster this work and be part of a national roll out.