

# Covid Recovery and Build Back Better projects (CRABBB)

## East Midlands Children's Services

September 2022 – August 2023

### Summary Report

### Background

In summer 2021, DfE invited Regional Improvement and Innovation Alliances (RIIA) groupings of local authority (LA) Children's Services to bid for activity that might support service delivery during the Covid recovery period and contribute to service development and improvement. Funding was offered within three strands:

1. Strand One contributed to regional collaborative arrangements and initiatives to support the sector-led approach to improvement.
2. Strand Two invited single LAs or regional groups to work with the DfE teams on identified policy areas
3. Strand Three provided an opportunity to scale and spread innovative practice previously funded and evaluated by DfE

The East Midlands region of 10 LAs submitted an optimistic and confident application across all three strands and was pleased that 95% of the bid was approved, with a value of £2.2m.

In the subsequent year since September 2021, the region has been highly active across a range of over twenty projects. Some of these have involved small groupings of colleagues or organisations working on activity for the benefit of the whole region, while other projects have been major initiatives involving colleagues from across the whole region.

Strand 1 projects	Strand 2 projects	Strand 3 projects
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Regional Data</li><li>• Self-assessment and peer challenge</li><li>• Family Hub development and roll-out</li><li>• UASC NTS regional support</li><li>• Developing strategic leadership</li><li>• Improving social work practice</li><li>• SEND improvement</li><li>• Investing in promising practice</li><li>• Packages of support</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Family Hubs - capacity building</li><li>• Safeguarding adolescents from extra-familial harm</li><li>• Reducing court backlogs</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Staying Close Staying Connected</li><li>• Improving the supply and quality of social work</li></ul>

### Progress with Strand 1 projects

Regional Data: The region continues to commission Leicestershire local authority to provide a full regional data service. These arrangements include the agreed national RIIA dataset (with migration to the new indicators) plus a few other agreed datasets in specific policy areas. The platform has been upgraded by Leicestershire this year to include additional analytical tools that enable users to extract intelligence from the site.

Self-assessment and peer challenge: The region has completed a full round of self-evaluation and peer challenge. All ten LAs submitted self-evaluations and agreed data that was shared with their partner LAs. The region divided into three groups for peer challenge and this year we also assigned a credible recent Director of Children's Services (DCS) to each triad to provide greater consistency of experience, quality assurance and rigour to the process. All triads have now completed this exercise of being challenged and challenging others. The notes and outcomes of these triad conversations are now

starting to be analysed and mapped and will drive the brokerage of local support and help to identify common priorities for future joint action.

Family Hubs: Within our Strand 1 proposal, we not only bid for the funds for a regional co-ordinator, but also requested an expansion of the limited funds provided within Strand 2 so that we could provide all ten LAs with some development capacity. This has proved to be an important and effective step as it has enabled the entire region to move together in consideration of development of the Family Hub approach, ably supported by the co-ordination provided by Lincolnshire. As a result, all ten LAs have developed their local interpretation of the approach and taken/taking this through their political process.

Unaccompanied asylum seeker national transfer scheme (UASC NTS) regional support: Because our region already benefitted from strong co-ordinating support for UASC within the EM Councils team, it was agreed to use our Strand 1 funds to build the capacity of this work and the team. This investment has seen continuing strong support within the region that includes political reporting, data analysis and modelling and practical support for the implementation of NTS in the East Midlands. Additional work streams have been created to develop foster care and supported lodgings, 16+ provision and opportunities for closer working across East Midlands social care structures to support UASC in light of NTS mandate.

Developing strategic leadership: The region developed and delivered a leadership development programme (CSSSL) for leaders considering career development that might take them in strategic and system leadership roles within children's services. All DCSs, several Assistant Directors (ADs), Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), Lead Members (LMs) and other partners contributed to a blended programme that has subsequently received ILM accreditation. A first cohort successfully completed the programme, several of whom have already made successful career steps. Evaluations were extremely positive from participants, contributors and employers.

Improving social work practice: The regional group of Principal Social Workers managed this fund to provide training and inspiration across the regional social work workforce. They created a schedule of seminars led by significant (inter)national contributors, with most events repeated to increase their reach. Well over 1,000 participants attended the events, recording very high levels of satisfaction, learning and impact.

SEND improvement: The regional programme of SEND peer challenge has been updated and extended to reflect the changing SEND pressures and pending inspection changes. A regional pool of reviewers continue to be trained and prepared to contribute to reviews and, within these few months, three LA areas received a SEND peer challenge. The schedule is set for the remaining LAs over the coming period. This work programme has dovetailed really well with the new SEND RIIA grant, for which a co-ordinator has been appointed and a three-year regional plan has been agreed by East Midlands Strategic Education Group (EMSEG) and East Midlands DCS group. A project board has been established to steer this work.

Investing in promising practice: As a region, it was agreed to invest this funding in two areas of work that were of interest for all LAs. Single LAs with expertise and capacity in each topic were commissioned to complete some development work that leads to the effective sharing of practice. Leicester LA has been developing their work related to the Lundy model of child participation and Nottingham LA has focussed on trauma informed practice. Both LAs are creating resources and materials that will be shared soon through regional seminars and communications.

Packages of support: A number of small projects were initiated and delivered to address some of the priority themes identified by individual/groups of LAs. In each case funds were distributed for clear project plans to support practice development or initiate new processes by LAs or regional groups. The general themes were around placement sufficiency, cost controls and stability, developing strength-based practice, supporting SEND transformation and improving workforce stability. The following projects have been delivered:

- Work with young people to develop 'Guidance for Care Commissioners', led by the East Midlands Regional Participation Leads Group

- Market management, engaging with providers, led by East Midlands Strategic Commissioning Leads Group
- Motivational resources for social work teams, led by, the regional Principal Social Workers Group
- The involvement of young researchers (with University of Derby) to develop more data and evidence of the lives lived by young people experiencing SEND. This will inform anticipatory duties/gaps in local offers.
- A workforce stability project to look into staff wellbeing initiatives across the region, led by the Workforce Development Group.
- Placement cost controls. The online portal has been developed to streamline and improve the regional fee review process, led by the Commissioning Leads group

### **Progress with Strand 2 projects**

Family Hubs - capacity building: This Strand 2 project provided some start-up funding for a single LA so, because of the regional commitment to make good progress with this policy, we utilised the Strand 1 opportunity to secure start-up funding for the other nine LAs, plus some regional co-ordination. See progress comments in the Strand 1 section above.

Safeguarding adolescents from extra-familial harm: Within this project, three LAs within the region contributed to national work that has investigated some key themes to safeguarding of children: Parental engagement, education as a protective factor and reachable moments. The projects developed threads to build a shared perspective across professional groups, exploring new ways of working and identifying pathways to respond to the complexity of extra familial harm.

Within our regional projects

- Lincolnshire developed a trauma informed toolkit for schools to underpin support and interventions with children and young people impacted by exploitation.
- Leicestershire established a trauma informed practice approach, using a contextual safeguarding framework, to support a group work offer and identify early opportunities for intervention.
- Nottinghamshire developed a 'Harm Outside the Home' toolkit, training based on relational-based practice and being restorative and trauma informed, plus improved communication pathways between police, social care and education providers about children who are at risk of violence and exploitation.

All projects have focused on the important roles for schools to create both early recognition of vulnerability but also in providing responses creating a safe space for children. Additionally, the theme of trauma as an element contributing to vulnerability, how this can assist the professional approach to formulate responses and the importance of relationships to engage young people and parents in ways that create opportunities for engagement.

A regional seminar was held to disseminate this work, attended by over 200 strategic leaders from across the region plus representatives from DfE, the NWG Network, Barnardo's, and representatives from the Youth Endowment Fund.

Reducing court backlogs: This project and funding has supported the development of a toolkit with associated training workshops, which have supported the development of best practice across the region. All 10 LAs have been fully engaged throughout the project and over 160 senior managers attended the events alongside assistant directors and designated family judges.

Early signs of progress and improvement are being seen in

- improved decision-making in public law outline (PLO) so that the right cases go to court at the right time
- improved preparedness for court and judicial feedback
- greater levels of collaboration within region and other family justice agencies
- fewer delays in the court process.

## Progress with Strand 3 projects

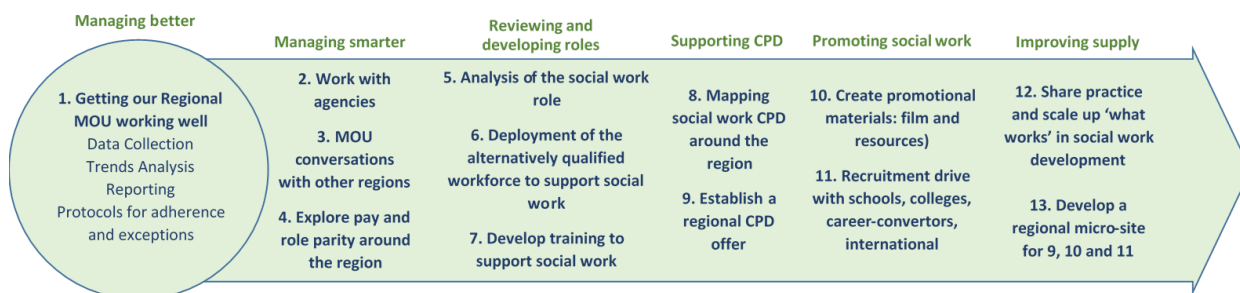
### Staying Close Staying Connected

This project funded the scale and spread of the Staying Close innovation across the East Midlands. The region is uniquely working as an entire group of LAs in this innovation so that there is consistent quality of our approach, shared learning, economies of scale and secure arrangements for young care leavers, especially those who might move across borders. We worked with the Break charity, who were part of the DfE Staying Close pilot project and supported all ten East Midlands local authorities to learn about the approach and develop the service arrangements and infrastructure required, so that all elements of the Staying Close approach are in place or under development across the region. All ten of the LAs and are now well placed to introduce and extend the Staying Close approach.

The key deliverables within the project have been a series of dedicated workshops, one-to-one coaching for LA colleagues and the publication of a series of 'How to' guides covering the key topics from intensive housing management, to governance arrangements and co-production. The ten local authorities have made the necessary strategic commitment to introduce and implement Staying Close as intended. They have employed or deployed a Staying Close Programme Manager, developed delivery plans, scoped local and regional need, scoped readiness to adopt the approach and engaged with key partners in readiness to deliver Staying Close in their area. They have also worked to ensure that accommodation and wrap around support can be delivered as desired – key partners include housing, private landlords, health, police, political leadership and voluntary sector providers.

### Improving the supply and quality of social work

This project started as an initiative to spread the innovation developed in the East region to introduce price controls and better market management in relation to social work agency employment. In particular, the plan was to focus on the effective use of an MOU, a Memorandum of Understanding, between local authorities. However, in the very early stages of the project it was recognised that an MOU alone will only ever deliver a partial solution, and so the project made wider considerations, as displayed in the schematic diagram below that was agreed with DfE. This underpinned a clear work plan, agreed by the EM DCS group to address wider workforce challenges around recruitment, retention, training and workload management of the social workers.



The project has gone extremely well and there will be continuing activity well beyond this Build Back Better project, as it has pump primed work-streams that will now be sustained and have longer-term impact than these immediate actions.

Within the MOU strand we now have a highly effective HR Leads group that meets regularly, stronger practice around MOU operations, a significant dataset that directly relates to social work price pressures and employment arrangements, plus better sharing of learning and challenge around the variations in practice.

Within the alternatively qualified strand we have now discussed the potential opportunity to use differently qualified workers in support of children's social work objectives and every LA has been provided with a bespoke tailored analysis of their situation to indicate the potential opportunity for different workforce deployments, outlining the risks, benefits and potential savings for them

Throughout this project, we have been in strong communication with our counterparts in other regions because much of this practice touches on borders and needs wider collaboration. We are pleased that

the MOU dialogue has now spread across most of the country and, following our hosting of a national seminar, ADCS is picking up this discussion nationally with DfE.

### **Summary evaluation**

The amount of activity undertaken in this short period, during which services have been recovering from lockdown restrictions, has sometimes being a challenge. Nevertheless, it is a remarkable tribute to the leadership, co-ordination and purposeful collaboration that exist in the region, that so much progress has been made.

The Strand 1 projects have helped the region to maintain and continue developing strong and effective processes for performance improvement across the region. This includes some of the analytical and diagnostic processes that add value to local work, build ambition and support leadership development

The Strand 2 projects have contributed to practice development in some key policy areas. Although too early to evaluate direct impact on outcomes for children and families, the policies and practice being introduced are already creating improvements in service performance and strong foundations with high potential for the future.

The Strand 3 projects have brought all LA in the region very purposefully together around some critical areas of work, and both projects will continue beyond this short-term funded period. There is now a strong regional commitment to introduce the Staying Close Staying Connected approach in our work with care leavers and the region is starting to develop a shared duty of care for the vulnerable young people. We are also applying to DfE for placement funding to extend this commitment further.

The social work workforce project became far more significant than we anticipated at the time of application. The current trends underway in the working patterns and cost pressures of social work is rapidly becoming a national crisis. Having some dedicated funding to this area has been invaluable in supporting the region to develop innovative approaches to almost intractable issues.

Because of the sheer volume of activity that this CRABBB funding supported, the coherent and consistent leadership and 'sponsorship' of the EM DCS group has been critical. They have provided an optimistic and confident approach to the projects, providing the encouragement and authorisation for their teams to get involved. It has also been vital to have strong, competent regional co-ordination and important to be able to use parts of the funding to increase the level of resourcing for this. Across all of these projects, numerous colleagues in all LAs have stepped up to play their part and the successful delivery of so much work in such a short period is credit to them and the culture that the EM DCS group creates. Recognition should also be made of the vital role played by Khalid Mahmood to coordinate, oversee and support the mobilisation of these regional projects.

Going forwards, the region continues to work together purposefully. Although the funding boost provided by CRABBB supported an unexpected and welcome surge of activity, the region showed it is capable of working together on several areas simultaneously to drive progress and improvement. The on-going regional plans, although less generously funded, will continue building on this momentum to add value wherever we can by working together on common goals.