

**Report to:** EXECUTIVE CABINET

**Date:** 23 March 2022

**Executive Member:** Councillor Bill Fairfoull – Deputy Executive Leader (Children’s Services)

**Reporting Officer:** Sarah Threlfall – Director of Transformation  
Ali Stathers-Tracey - Director of Children's Services

**Subject:** **PROPOSAL TO CREATE A LIMITED TIME CHILDREN’S SAFEGUARDING TEAM TO ADDRESS ACUTE DEMAND AND CAPACITY ISSUES IN THE SYSTEM**

**Report Summary:**

The report sets out proposals as an interim measure to engage with a specialist recruitment agency already procured by AGMA who can within a short timescale provide a self-contained social work team to address a significant capacity issue.

The capacity issue has arisen as a result of ongoing increases in demand at the social care front door, which have caused a bottleneck in assessment and significantly impacted on timeliness of assessments for Children in Need as well as increased vacancy rates not back filled by agency staff.

The project team will focus on completing Children & Family Assessments coming through the Multi-agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). This will allow current teams to complete ongoing case work whilst we also actively recruit to existing vacancies. The project team will consist of a Project Manager and five project social workers for a six-month duration from the 1 April 2022.

The additional capacity will come at a cost of £250k and budget will be provided from ring-fenced reserves. The provision of additional capacity will ensure that timely outcomes and support for children and families is provided and risk is appropriately managed. A time-limited injection of capacity will ensure that cases do not escalate, and outcomes for families do not worsen.

We had anticipated that the impact of the pandemic would be long term and families would be under increased pressure, it would appear that this is presenting in the form of increased contacts and referrals into children’s social care. This is further impacted by high vacancy rates in Neighbourhood Duty & Assessment Teams. As this is an acute issue which is placing significant pressure on the system a short, six-month project to provide additional assessment capacity, fully aligned with existing teams and structures is an appropriate response. The team will also provide support to newly qualified social workers and AYSE to build skills, knowledge and capacity.

By positioning the project team to undertake new children & family assessments progressing from the MASH will cause the least disruption in work flow and allow for a planned safe exit. Joint working and ensuring proper integration preventative support services and schools will be a key focus throughout the contract.

**Recommendations:** It is recommended that Council approve the proposal to draw down funding from reserves of £250k to bring additional capacity into the

organisation via the Reed contract for a six-month period to deal with an increase in referrals and associated assessments.

**Corporate Plan:**

The delivery of effective outcomes for children and families requiring support is a key element of the delivery of the Corporate Plan

**Policy Implications:**

There are no direct policy implications

**Financial Implications:  
(Authorised by the statutory  
Section 151 Officer & Chief  
Finance Officer)**

There is no existing available budget in Children's Social Care to pay for this intervention. This will need to be funded from use of one off reserves. There is £371,000 of uncommitted reserves in the MTFS reserve of which £250,000 can be utilised to support this leaving the council with £121,000 in the MTFS reserve.

**Legal Implications:  
(Authorised by the Borough  
Solicitor)**

This report sets out a managed approach to addressing unprecedented demand caused by the impact of the Covid Pandemic to avoid finding ourselves in crisis point. The HR directors predicting this may be an issue planned for this eventuality when procuring the current agency contract that provides for specialist drop in teams to provide critical short term support. It will be necessary to have clear contract monitoring arrangements in place to ensure that we are achieving best value and that the interim nature of the contact will be achieved.

**Risk Management:**

Risks associated with bringing in additional, time- limited capacity will be managed through effective contract management, the use of clear performance frameworks and escalation procedure. A focus will be placed on the need to ensure effective handover and support.

**Background Information:**

The background papers relating to this report can be inspected by contacting Sarah Threlfall, Director of Transformation



Telephone: 0161 342 4417



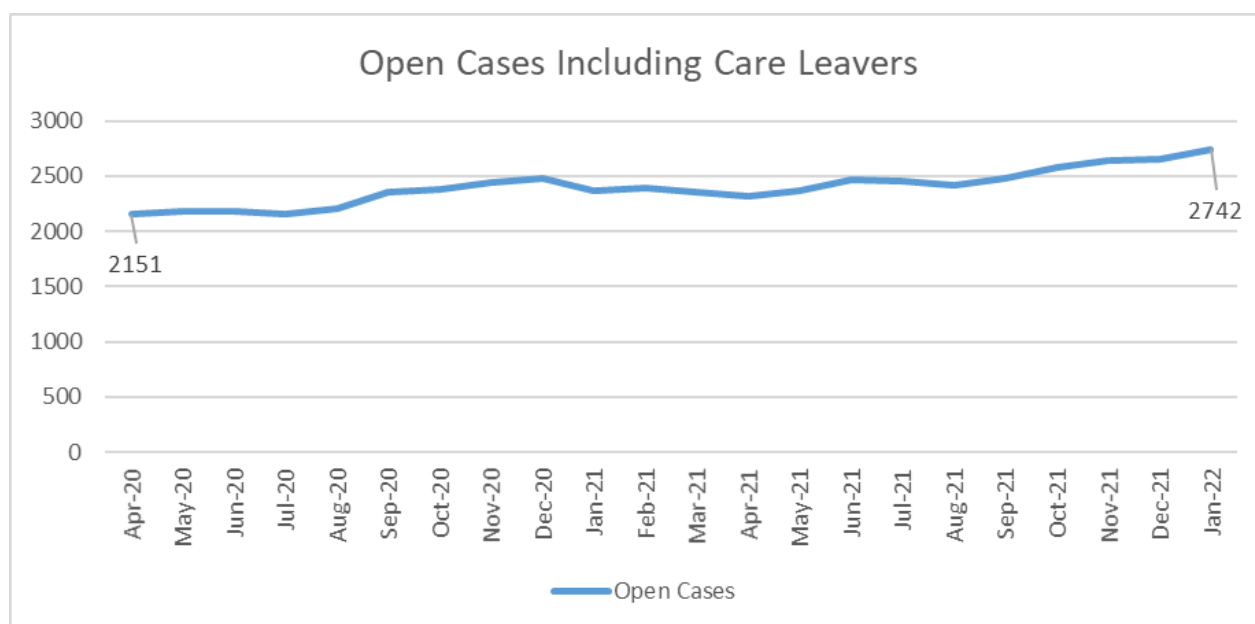
e-mail: [sarah.threlfall@tameside.gov.uk](mailto:sarah.threlfall@tameside.gov.uk)

## 1. DEMAND ON CHILDREN'S SERVICES

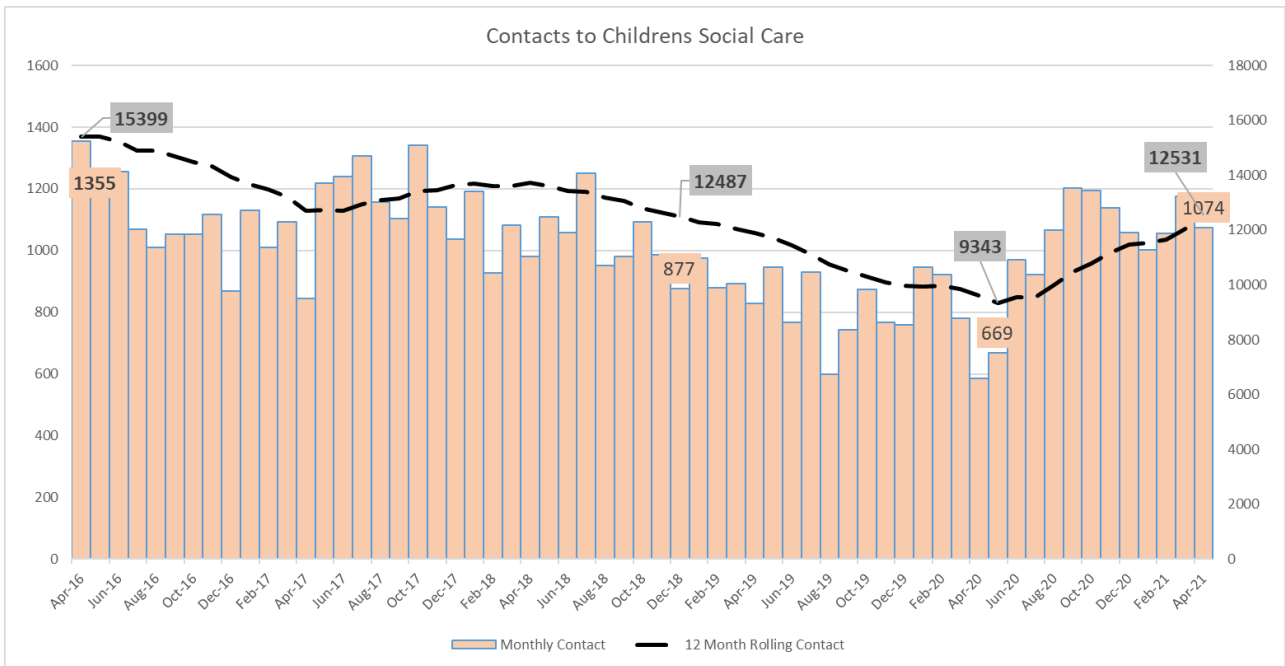
- 1.1 Overall children's services has seen a significant increase in demand at the front door, which has continued at a relatively consistent rate since summer 2020 running counter to a longer term decrease in demand and an unprecedented drop in contact and referrals at the beginning of the pandemic.
- 1.2 At the same time, despite periods of volatility, numbers of children subject to Child Protection and Children Cared for by the local authority have remained relatively consistent.
- 1.3 This has led to an overall shift in open cases towards cases undergoing assessment and Child In Need Cases held within the Children's Social Work Neighbourhood Teams. In April 2020 there were a total of 2151 open cases including care leavers held in Children's Social care. By the end of January 2022 this had increased by 27% to 2742 with the proportion of Cases that were open at Child in Need Level (including those undergoing assessments and care leavers) increasing from 50% of open cases to 64% of open cases. The detail below gives a summary of this data.
- 1.3 It is recommended that the Council approve the proposal to draw down funding from reserves of £250k to bring additional capacity into the organisation via the Reed contract for a six-month period to deal with an increase in referrals and associated assessments.

## 2.0 DATA TRENDS – CONTACT TO ASSESSMENT COMPLETION

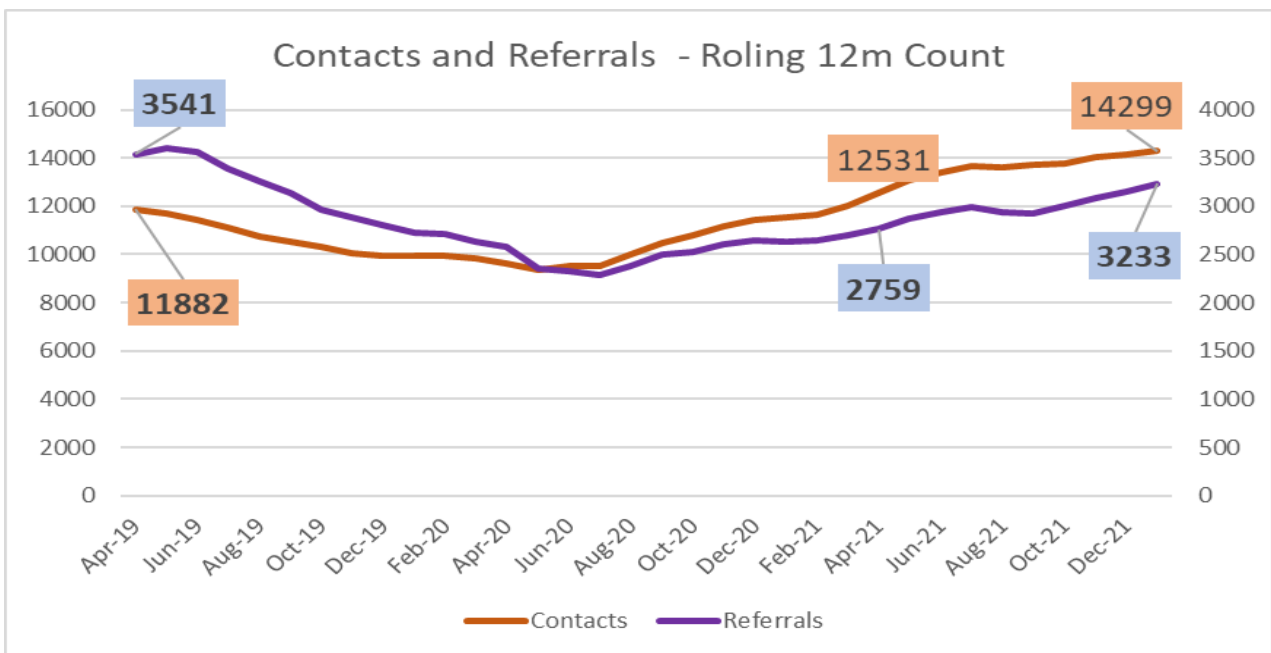
- 2.1 The two years since the start of the pandemic have seen a reversal of the long-term trend of reducing overall case numbers with cases rising by 27% since the start of 2020/21.



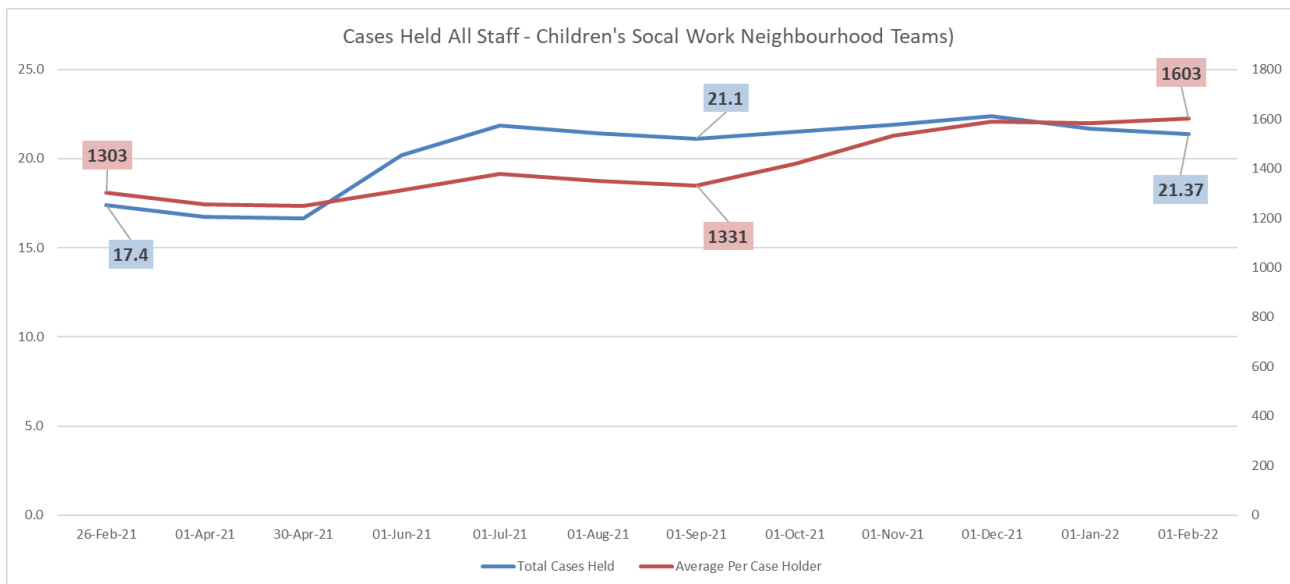
- 2.2 Contacts to Children's Social Care have also see the same reversal with a significant rise in the number of contacts following a long-term decreasing trend. Current monthly and rolling contact counts are similar to those last seen in December 2018 and are beginning to show signs of stabilising at a significantly higher volume.



2.3 Whilst initially supported by an increased Early Help Offer the rate of referrals into Children’s Social Care saw a lower rate of increase the proportion of contacts converting to referral, likely driven by both a greater volume of demand and increased complexity of cases, has increased since summer 2021. Between February and August 2021 conversion to referral was seen at between 18-21% with the proportion increasing from August onwards in line with spike in overall contact to between 22-27%.



2.4 This has had a resulting impact on the overall number of open cases within the Children’s Social Work Neighbourhood teams with caseloads remaining high as rising numbers of cases open keep pace with new additions to the workforce.



### 3.0 PROPOSAL

- 3.1 Trends in Children's social care demand have fluctuated in recent years and the authority is investing in increasing capacity to deal with increases in demand. Significant investments in 2021 saw an increase in the overall number of social workers employed. The local authority is actively engaged in a number of relevant initiatives to support social work recruitment and staff development, but in an extremely challenging market, this continue to be a challenge. Demand at the front door contact and referrals continue to rise, it is hypothecated that this is linked to the pressures families are under post Covid and as we enter a cost of living crisis and reflects a general trend nationally and regionally, although one which is felt much more acutely in Tameside.
- 3.2 As an interim measure therefore, it is proposed that we seek to use the specialist agency who have already been procured by AGMA to provide agency and other specialist support to provide a self-contained social work team along with its own management, to undertake a significant number of Assessments for our CIN cohort over a short timescale.
- 3.3 The project will have a roll in phased start with the Team Manager starting in week 0 and remainder of the team commencing on week 1 with a total duration of 6 months. The work will be focused on direct contact with families and children to make appropriate judgements about the risks for a family and regular contact with existing teams via the Denton Office base will be critical.
- 3.4 The desired outcome would be to manage an acute issue of increasing numbers of children in need requiring assessment, to bring assessment timeliness to a reasonable level and to ensure that our children and families are appropriately supported and safeguarded.
- 3.5 The extra capacity will also allow current teams to complete existing case work whilst we continue to actively recruit to existing vacancies and support newly qualified social workers.
- 3.6 The total value of the contract is £250k to deliver, as a managed service, a six-month programme focusing on children requiring assessment.

### 4. RECOMMENDATION

- 4.1 As set out on the front of the report.