

CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY PANEL

Date:	Monday 26th January, 2026
Time:	4.30 pm
Venue:	Mandela Room, Town Hall

AGENDA

1. Welcome and Fire Evacuation Procedure

In the event the fire alarm sounds attendees will be advised to evacuate the building via the nearest fire exit and assemble at the Bottle of Notes opposite MIMA.

2. Apologies for Absence

3. Declarations of Interest

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5. Further Evidence 7 - 20

The Corporate Director of Children's Services will be in attendance to provide further evidence in relation to the following areas:-

- a) Out of area placements – Children's Social Care
- b) Fostering recruitment (Verbal)
- c) Workforce development strategy (Verbal)

6. Director's Update

The Corporate Director of Children's Services to provide verbal updates on any matters pertinent to the Panel, as and when appropriate.

7. Overview and Scrutiny Board Update

The Chair will provide a verbal update on business conducted at the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting held on 18 December 2025.

8. Any other urgent items which in the opinion of the Chair, may be considered.

9. Date and Time of Next Meeting - Monday, 9 March 2026, 4.30pm

Charlotte Benjamin
Director of Legal and Governance Services

Town Hall
Middlesbrough
Friday 16 January 2026

MEMBERSHIP

Councillors E Lynch (Chair), D Jackson (Vice-Chair), M Nugent, S Platt, A Romaine, S Tranter and Z Uddin.

Assistance in accessing information

Should you have any queries on accessing the Agenda and associated information please contact Joanne Dixon / Keris Allan, 01642 729713 / 01642 727221, joanne_dixon@middlesbrough.gov.uk / keris_allan@middlesbrough.gov.uk

CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY PANEL

A meeting of the Children's Scrutiny Panel was held on 8 December 2025.

PRESENT: Councillor Lynch (Chair), Councillor Jackson (Vice Chair); Councillors: S Platt and Uddin.

OFFICERS: C Cannon, J Dixon and G Watson.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE were submitted on behalf of Councillors Nugent, Romaine and Tranter.

**** DECLARATIONS OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

Name of Member	Type of Interest	Nature of Interest
Councillor Lynch	Non-pecuniary	Employed within education setting.
Councillor Jackson	Non-pecuniary	School Governor.

WELCOME AND EVACUATION PROCEDURE

The Chair welcomed those present and highlighted the Council's Fire Evacuation Procedure.

MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING OF THE CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY PANEL HELD ON 27 OCTOBER 2025

The Minutes of the previous meeting of the Children's Scrutiny Panel held on 27 October 2025 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

SOUTH TEES SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN PARTNERSHIP (STSCP) – ANNUAL UPDATE

C Cannon, Interim Director of Education and Partnerships, and G Watson, South Tees Safeguarding Children Partnership Manager, were in attendance at the meeting to provide the Panel with an annual update in relation to the South Tees Safeguarding Children Partnership (STSCP).

A copy of the STSCP's Annual Report 2024-25 had been circulated to the Panel with the agenda in advance of the meeting and it was highlighted that this was presented to the Scrutiny Panel on an annual basis.

Members' attention was drawn, in particular, to the following areas within the report:-

- Who the STSCP were and what it did – A statutory multi-agency partnership with responsibility for safeguarding arrangements to protect vulnerable children. The STSCP was equally funded by its four partners – Middlesbrough Council, Redcar and Cleveland Council, Cleveland Police and North East, North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (NENC ICB). The STSCP supported and enabled local organisations and agencies to work together to ensure children were safeguarded and their welfare promoted and was committed to achieving the best possible outcomes for children and families.
- Governance Structure – The STSCP sat beneath the Lead Safeguarding Partners Group and STSCP Executive (comprising of delegated partners). As well as a Learning and Development Group and a Quality and Performance Group feeding into the STSCP Executive, there were four sub-groups – Tees Performance Management, Tees Training Group, Tees Harm outside the Home (HoTH) Group and Tees Procedures. Each group's role was outlined in the report. In addition, each of the groups within the structure linked to relevant strategic partnerships across the South Tees.

- Key Statistics/Data – In relation to Middlesbrough, at the time the annual report was produced (March 2025), there were 370 children on a Child Protection Plan. This was a 17% increase from the previous year. There were 506 children who were looked after – this was a 4% decrease from the previous year. There were more than 1,000 contacts for support each month, with 1,970 contacts recorded in March 2025 – a 22% increase from 2024.
- Building on Good Practice – A “Neglect Strategy” was developed and launched for Practitioners across South Tees. In addition, the Tees Harm outside the Home (HoTH) Strategy was developed and launched, bringing it in line with the latest agendas such as criminal exploitation and contextual safeguarding of harm outside the home. The HoTH operating procedure was agreed and implemented across the whole of Tees from April 2025. The STSCP had also increased learning opportunities available to staff and partners, for example, by hosting on-line virtual events and briefings.
- Practice Reviews and Guidance – The professional challenge and escalation guidance had been revised and updated in response to learning from Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews. Practice Reviews and Guidance had been updated and were available on the Tees Procedures website.
- Challenges:-
 - Ofsted had challenged both Middlesbrough and Redcar and Cleveland Councils on the implementation of their shared threshold document (ILACS 2019). In response, the STSCP reviewed the Threshold of Need “Providing the Right Support to Meet a Child’s Needs” Tees-wide and had adopted the Tees Threshold document in order to strengthen the improvement journey. Training on the use of the document was available to partners.
 - The absence of the permanent Safeguarding Nurse role in the ICB was a cause for concern, particularly with health colleagues who felt this post was key to the escalation of safeguarding concerns in the health trusts. There were further concerns regarding attendance by the permanent ICB representatives at the executive level meetings which was noted as a weakness to the partnership.
 - Diversity was a high level priority across the work of the Partnership. The Partnership continued to promote the use of interpreters to communicate with families whose first language was not English and it was recognised that the use of interpreters by front line staff was integral to effective communication with these families. The Partnership continued to monitor the recording of ethnicity as part of the audit program and that this, together with disabilities, was considered as part of assessments and the lived experience of the child/young person.

A discussion ensued and the following issues were raised:-

- Clarification was sought around the 22% increase in contacts for support and whether the increase was potentially due to training needs around safeguarding issues being addressed. The Panel was advised that the 22% increase referred to was for 2024 and that the figures for 2025 would be published in next year's annual report. In terms of the increase, it was considered that this was purely due to demand on services.
- A Member asked if an example could be provided of what constituted ‘harm outside the home’. In response, it was stated that the main issue was exploitation of teenagers, for example, being involved in delivering drugs, knife crime and sexual exploitation. The Harm outside the Home (HoTH) model had been implemented across the whole of the Tees to ensure a consistent approach was taken and some services had been restructured in an attempt to tackle some of the pressures.

- Reference was made to the ICB Safeguarding Nurse and it was queried what the purpose of this role was. It was explained that the STSCP required a Health representative and that, at the time of writing the annual report, there had been significant challenges around the lack of an ICB Safeguarding representative. Following some restructuring within the ICB, a permanent Safeguarding Nurse had been appointed which had resolved this issue and they attended all associated meetings to bring significant knowledge from a health perspective, having health oversight for looked after children and children subject to child protection. It was highlighted, however, that the ICB was commencing a further restructure and it was unknown at this stage what the outcome would be.
- Reference was made to the role of Designated Safeguarding Leads in schools and it was queried whether all Primary and Secondary Schools had one. It was stated that there should be a Designated Safeguarding Lead in every school and that there was a Designated Safeguarding Network to bring all Lead Officers together for training and discussion.
- A Panel Member raised a query in relation to whether staffing levels were adequate, particularly Social Workers, and around the use of agency staff. The Panel was informed that the Council had worked hard to recruit and retain staff as changes in staffing could have a detrimental impact on children and young people in terms of consistency. There tended to be a high turnover of staff and there had been some restructuring of Services to create the Harm Outside the Home Team. There was a continual drive to ensure permanent staff were retained and opportunities to make agency staff permanent, where appropriate, was always explored and promoted, however, recruitment and retention was a nationwide issue within the sector.
- It was acknowledged that volume of demand was a significant challenge and in response to a query it was explained that the increased demand for services was nationwide and not confined to Middlesbrough, however, Middlesbrough did have a unique population make up in that it was a small geographical area with a very diverse, changing community. Demand had grown and the challenge was for the services to meet demand.
- In response to a question around the impact of poverty on neglect, it was stated that it could play a significant role and that 39% of children in Middlesbrough were deemed to be living in poverty. There was currently a big focus on the poverty strategy which Public Health was leading on. The Chair highlighted that OSB had recently received a presentation on the Poverty Strategy and that it might be useful for the Panel to receive further information regarding this, from a Children's Services perspective, in the future.

The Chair thanked the Officers for their attendance and the information provided.

AGREED that the information provided in relation to the South Tees Safeguarding Children Partnership's Annual Report be noted.

POSSIBLE TERMS OF REFERENCE – DISCUSSION ITEM

The Panel was asked to consider setting Terms of Reference for its current scrutiny investigation into 'Out of Area Specialist Provision'.

Proposed Draft Terms of Reference had been circulated with the meeting agenda for the Panel's consideration.

Following discussion, Members agreed that the review of out of area specialist provision should focus on SEND out of area specialist provision in an education context and, in a social care context, out of area provision for children known to social care with complex needs. It was agreed that the Democratic Services Officer would amend the wording of the Draft Terms of Reference to reflect this and to circulate to Panel Members.

The Panel identified some potential key lines of enquiry as follows:-

- What are the gaps in specialist provision locally?

- What are we currently doing to reduce those gaps?
- Forward planning to meet identified areas of increasing demand in areas of specialist provision.
- Ensuring children/young people have their needs met and supported and that provision was sustainable.
- Cost analysis of out of area specialist provision versus expanding local provision.

AGREED that the Terms of Reference for the Panel's review of 'Out of Area Specialist Provision' be agreed as follows:-

1. To examine the current position in Middlesbrough regarding the use of Out of Area Specialist Provision, including how and why out of area placements are made :
 - a) In a SEND educational context.
 - b) In a complex needs, social care context.
2. To examine how Middlesbrough's use of Out of Area specialist provision compares locally and nationally.
3. To consider current workforce development strategies and assess their impact on Out of Area specialist provision in both education and social care settings.
4. To consider best practice and procedures regarding Out of Area specialist provision for both education and social care elements.

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD UPDATE

The Chair provided a verbal update in relation to the business conducted at the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting held on 19 November 2025, namely:

- Scrutiny Chairs' updates.
- OSB Review into Poverty – Overview.
- Executive Member for Finance - Provided a presentation on Quarter One budget outturn.
- Executive Forward Plan.
- Progress on Forward Plan actions
- Next meeting of OSB – Thursday, 18 December at 4.30pm.

NOTED

ANY OTHER URGENT ITEMS WHICH, IN THE OPINION OF THE CHAIR, MAY BE CONSIDERED

There were no urgent items.

DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Children's Scrutiny Panel was scheduled for Monday, 26 January 2026 at 4.30pm.

External Social Care Placements

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Agenda Item 5



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What is an External Social Care Placement?

External placements are commissioned to accommodate children and young people in our care where we are unable to offer a placement match internally, the types of placements we commission are:

- Independent Fostering Placements (IFA)
- Children's Residential Placements
- Educational Residential Placements
- Supported Accommodation Placements (16+)
- Mother & Baby Assessment Residential Assessment
- Secure

They are either:

In Area

- It is geographically located within Middlesbrough

Or

Out of Area

- It is geographically located outside of Middlesbrough



Reasons for using External Placements

There are a number of reasons why it may be necessary to commission a place for a child or young person from an external provider, which include but are not limited to:

- **Sufficiency Gaps** – whilst the Council has its own fostering and residential services, they unfortunately do not provide the capacity to offer placements for all our children and young people
- **Individual needs of a child** – sometimes the needs of the child or young person cannot be met by internal provision, this can be for many reasons, such as complex needs, criminal exploitation, etc
- **Specialism** – the provider may offer therapies or specialist expertise which is not available in our internal provision
- **Safety** - The child or young person may have had to be moved away from the local area and therefore placement with internal or external in boundary placements would not be possible
- **Secure** – secure placements are approved by court and there are specific units that are not delivered by or located in Middlesbrough



How do we meet our Sufficiency Duty



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Independent Fostering Sufficiency

Middlesbrough Council together with the other 11 North East Local Authorities have commissioned the NEPO603 Tyne-Tees Independent Foster Care Services - [Awarded Contract Overview - Open | Developed by Nepo Framework](#).

This framework is used to secure places where our internal fostering service is unable to provide a placement match.

Referrals are shared with suppliers and where an offer is received then a placement is made.

The weekly rates are fixed as part of the procurement.

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Where we are unable to secure a placement via NEPO603 then we have a number of spot contracts with Independent Fostering Agencies.

Middlesbrough Council is in a positive position as the majority of our fostering placements are off framework – as of 6th January 2026 there were **85.42%** Framework placements and only 14.58% spot placements.

The total number of active external fostering placements on 6th January 2026 were **144** (28% of CLA)



Residential Sufficiency

Middlesbrough Council have 2 block contract arrangements, 1 with Caretech (Cambian) which provides 9 beds across 3 homes and the other is with Invested Childcare and provides 3 beds in 1 home. These block contracts offer residential care provision which complements our in-house beds.

The weekly bed rate is highly competitive compared to spot contracts and in 2024/25 we achieved a cost avoidance of £792k.

All the block homes are rated good or outstanding with Ofsted.

We achieve a high occupancy rate and in 2024/25 those were:

- Caretech – 94%
- Invested – 99%

We have also received positive feedback from both professionals and children/young people, and these can be seen on the next 2 slides.



Positive Feedback from Professionals & Children/Young People

Overall, I feel College View holds a really high standard in terms of the quality of care they provide toward the YP that live there and they really make a difference for YP. I find that the team are supported by each other and there is a good leadership structure in place.

Absolutely excellent in all categories of communication. We work with a lot of care providers, and none are anywhere near in terms of service that Invested are.

I work with young people from a wide range of care settings. College View is outstanding in comparison to others. Darren is a fantastic manager and this carries through his whole team. There is a real sense of family and belonging, and this is reflected in comments that I have received from students who have lived there.

Absolutely, the change I have seen in the young person I work with since he came to live with you a year ago is wonderful. Staff are fully supportive and encourage the young person. if they don't feel like they want to speak for themselves staff will ensure their voice is heard. They are proactive in and out of meetings for young people and are continuously considering how best to support.

I love the homes food, the laughter we all have with my peers and staff and I love my bedroom. I was very happy to see all the staff at Beauty and the Beast". I enjoyed going to the rides with staff and my peers this month. I feel very supported by the staff in the home and how they supported me through my interviews with the police

"I want to thank all of the staff for everything that they have done for me, I really appreciate it, you have all really helped me and I really do appreciate it. I will miss you all".

I like how the adults said they were proud of me when I passed my functional skills maths and English.

I feel really safe in the home. I don't leave the home without adults and if I do it's because I'm doing something with one of them. I really like my room and my flags and sharks. The other kids are quiet, and I like that they aren't loud.



External Children's Residential Placements

Overall External Costs

- We have 49 Children in external registered children's home placements
- The average cost per placement is £6,628 per week

This includes:

- 5 Children in Specialist Solo Residential children's home placements at an average cost of £16,731
- 1 child in a Secure Residential placement at a cost of £7,794 per week.

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Teesside provision

- 49% of external children's placements are within the Teesside Area
- 12 Block Contract beds at an average cost of £4,295 per week
- 12 further spot contracted external placements within Teesside (*4 in Middlesbrough*) at an average cost of £4,979 per week



Placement Team Case Study (Child A)

Background and Challenge

- A significant in-placement incident resulted in notice being served by the registered residential provision
- Child A moved to a short-term unregistered placement on 2:1 staffing, at a cost of £7,295 per week

Placement Team Intervention

Within a 6-week period, the Placement Team actively monitored progress, met with the provider and negotiated a reduction in staffing:

- Weekly costs were reduced by £2,153, and staffing reduced to 1:1, in line with Supported Accommodation Regulations requirements

After 4 weeks at 1:1 staffing Placement Team secured:

- Ofsted-registered Supported Accommodation in the Northeast at a cost of £4,950 per week

Further direct provider engagement in Middlesbrough resulted in:

- A move to a registered Supported Accommodation provider within the Local Authority boundary, in line with Child A's wishes
- A further weekly saving of £1,790 per week

Current Position and Impact

- Child A now resides in a registered Supported Accommodation Setting within the Local Authority Boundary
- Cost avoidance over £90,000 has been achieved in the current financial year



Placement Team Case Study (Child B)

Background & Challenge

- Child B resided for almost two years in a specialist residential setting for children with Autism and Learning Disabilities
- A planned move was required due a planned closure of the home
- A residential and fostering search was conducted, identifying the lowest-cost residential option able to meet need and maintain current education at a cost of £7,250 per week

Placement Team Intervention

The Placement Team undertook direct, relationship-based engagement with Independent Fostering Agencies, identifying:

- ☒ A fostering provider developing a bespoke care package with potential suitability to meet Child B's needs
- ☒ Experienced carers becoming available, with evidenced relevant experience

Targeted information-sharing and joint discussions held with the Social Work Team resulted in:

- A formal offer of placement from an Independent Fostering Agency
- A planned and supported transition from residential care to a fostering setting

Current Position and Impact

- Child B is now settled and thriving in foster care
- Educational stability has been maintained
- A high-cost residential placement has been avoided
- Cost avoidance: over £200,000 achieved within the current financial year

Placement Team Case Study (Child C)

Background & Challenge

- A significant in-placement incident resulted in notice being served by the registered residential provision
- Child C subsequently moved to an emergency unregistered setting on 3:1 staffing, with a Deprivation of Liberty order in place, at an initial cost of £20,852 per week

Placement Team Intervention

Regular reviews conducted with senior management at provider, resulting in the following outcomes:

- Weekly costs were reduced through negotiation of an improved hourly staff rate, decreasing costs by £4,037 per week
- After a period of 6 weeks, an agreement was reached to reduce overnight staff cover, generating a further cost reduction of £2,519 per week
- Subsequent reviews resulted in agreement to reduce the staffing package to 2:1, reducing weekly cost by an additional £2,519

Supported Accommodation Search

With 2:1 staffing in place and evidence of progress made, an updated Supported Accommodation search was undertaken:

- Through direct discussions with providers and evidencing the progress made by Child C, an Ofsted registered Supported Accommodation placement was secured at a cost of £4,950 per week.

Current Position and Impact

- Child C will move to a registered supported accommodation provision on 13th January 2026
- This represents a cost reduction of £15,902 per week compared to the initial placement, and £6726 per week compared to the current 2:1 package
- There is a cost avoidance potential of a further £74,000 for the remainder of the current financial year, following the move taking place



Supported Accommodation (16+ with support needs) Sufficiency

The Council has its own internal 16+ supported accommodation provision but due to large numbers of young people aged 16+ with support needs we have been reliant on the external market.

The team have worked with a range of stakeholders who have come into the market and commissioned a range of spot support placements over the years. The opportunity in 2024 to work with a local supplier to commission a block arrangement was positive and will allow us to add 18 units and 1 crisis pad to our capacity enhancing our ability to meet our sufficiency duty.

As of 5th January 2026, there were 25 active spot placements, with 7 of those being in our new block placements.

As we progress through the year, we are looking forward to seeing a shift from high numbers of spot placements to an increase in the block occupancy rates which will also bring efficiencies by avoiding having to commission higher rate spot placements.

The average block weekly unit rates are £1,340 compared to the current spot average weekly unit rate of £2,321.



18+ Support

In 2025 a Provider approached the Local Authority as they had identified a building for 18+ accommodation. The Local Authority have commissioned 27 beds in this provision which will support our sufficiency strategy and provide a pathway for moving young people into independence.

This service will avoid the need for young people to remain in their placement post 18 and bed blocking which has been a challenge for Children's Services previously.

The provision has been open for 4 weeks and there are currently 19 active placements.

The young people will claim Housing Benefit and the Local Authority will fund staff within the provision to provide general support offer around wellbeing, employment, training and education.

We are wanting to ensure that our young people are supported effectively as they move into independence and take ownership of their own future confidently.

Next Steps

There is a work plan in place for Commissioning and the following are some of the priority areas in relation to improving our sufficiency responsibilities:

- Working with care provider who is looking to open 3 new homes in Middlesbrough to develop a business case for commissioning approach
 - Working with one of the block providers who is also looking to open further homes to develop a business case and considering procurement options linked to active contract.
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- Continue to monitor submission of certificate of lawfulness and/or C2 planning applications received and where the provider has not notified us engage with them so we can influence the development of the right type of homes to meet our sufficiency gaps.
 - Continue to work collaboratively as part of North-East Strategic Children's Commissioning Group (SCCG) focusing on Regional Care Cooperative (RCC) development and regional sufficiency work.

