

EXECUTIVE MEMBER REPORT TO COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: Executive Member for Children's Services

DATE OF MEETING: 09 July 2025

The purpose of this report is to provide an update to members on areas of activity within my portfolio including performance against strategic priorities.

COUNCIL PLAN PRIORITIES

We will show Middlesbrough's children that they matter and work to make our town safe and welcoming and to improve outcomes for all children and young people.

Update:

- **Number of young people accessing early help via Middlesbrough Council:** 577
- **Number of foster carers with Middlesbrough Council:** 83 foster carers, 119 connected carers, looking after a total of 143 children.
- **Number of children in our care:** 498
- **Percentage of children in our care attending school:** 85.4% of all children. (96.2% at primary and 76.2.5% at secondary.) 67.8% of 16- to 19-year-olds in Employment, education and training.

HIGHLIGHTS

Early Help via the Stronger Families Service

- 1.1 The Stronger Families service aims to support families early in order to stop the need for young people being taken into care. Working with families to keep children in a safe home is better for the young person's wellbeing and it is more cost effective.
- 1.2 The workforce continues to be stable in Early Help, with very little turnover so children benefit from consistent and strong relationships with Family Practitioners. Workload is going down in Early Help due to reviews of cases that have been open over nine months – now at 17.6 children per FTE which is a significant decrease on the previous month.
- 1.3 98% of children closed to the Early Help service in May did so with positive outcomes achieved and Family Feedback informs us that families feel involved and have ownership of their plan. We know that the majority of children who have received early help services do not come back into early help following 12 months of case closure.
- 1.4 Our Family Help Strategy is focused on increasing the proportion of cases where external partners deliver interventions. This might be health, education, housing,

Recovery Solutions or charities like Barnardo's, and the MFC Foundation. Most of our early help cases (68%) are held by the Partnership.

Multi-Agency Children's Hub (MACH) and Assessment

- 1.5 The MACH is our front door – the first point of contact for concerns about a young person. The social work staff team within the MACH are permanent workers and are very effective in the day-to-day screening and signposting to appropriate services to the children of Middlesbrough and their families.
- 1.6 Following staffing changes, interim leadership arrangements and new practice leads are in place and ongoing recruitment is progressing. Two interim service managers are commencing over the next fortnight to provide overnight support to the MACH and Assessment Service.
- 1.7 Work is underway to strengthen practice in the MACH. We have put extra resources in to support audit work. To make collaboration easier with partners, a MACH referral portal is under consideration. We are also introducing AI tools to support screening. Work is commencing on a specific piece of work around the multi-agency contacts to the front door to review the volume and quality of these. A MACH strategic Board is meeting fortnightly to support improvements across the partnership. I receive regular updates on the action plan and discuss these with officers. As a result of this work, we are seeing improvements to the quality of initial screening work. Staff are working to develop the supervision and audit timeliness remain areas for development. I am confident this work will strengthen the service.

Fostering

- 1.8 The Fostering Service is split into three teams focussing on recruitment, support to current approved carers and support to connected carers – carers within the young person's wider family or friendship circle. Foster carers provide stable and supportive homes for young people and the work they do is more effective in terms of outcomes and cost than residential homes. All staff across the foster service are permanent employees – which is a sign of how Children's Services is stabilising.
- 1.9 The Modernising Fostering Project began in April and our Kinship Team is now fully staffed and working on updating our Kinship Care Offer.
- 1.10 Middlesbrough has now been recognised as a Fostering Friendly employer. The Fostering Team have held the first of the fostering events with staff at Fountain Court, to advise employees of the fostering role and the process to approval as a foster carer.
- 1.11 As part of Foster Care fortnight, I attended the Foster Care Celebration event alongside The Mayor. The event was a celebration of the people who do so much for young people in our town by providing them a safe and loving home as foster carers. The theme was the power of relationships this year and The Mayor spoke powerfully about his own experiences and the impact his foster carers have had on his life. The event was incredibly moving and it was an honour to see the awards and recognition given to foster carers.
- 1.12 We have been working to raise the profile of fostering in Middlesbrough and to celebrate the work our foster carers do on social media. A recent Facebook post which highlighted the anonymised case of the Middlesbrough boy, aged four, "who

needs your help” reached 117,000 people, had 1,100 shares and hundreds of comments. It led to 26 enquiries to Middlesbrough about becoming a foster carer and 29 enquiries to other Local Authorities in the region.

Cared for Children

- 1.13 Within Middlesbrough there are currently 492 children who are cared for with a further 16 children exiting care. 88.3% of all children in our care aged five and over are in education, employment or training (broken down as 96.7% of five to 15 years-olds and 64.5% of 16+.)
- 1.14 A project funded by the DfE looking at supporting reunification has now concluded. This work gave us additional capacity to review all children open to the cared for children's teams and assisted us to understand the family members taking additional caring roles. With the learning from this project and the addition of the new Kinship Team, we will be able to support family members to care for young people in a family setting.
- 1.15 Lower numbers of young people per Social Worker have been maintained and we continue to see a high level of knowledge from workers regarding the children and young people they are working with. As always, quality of work has been a focus, with regular service meetings taking place around good news stories, data and learning from audit, which assist the service in developing further. This has been recognised in the increased compliments from IROs, the Courts and other professionals.
- 1.16 Although still a high number of agency workers this is slowly improving with agency workers converting to permanent roles, early career social workers taking up posts in teams and experienced Social Workers joining us from other councils. This shows an improved confidence in Middlesbrough.

Pathways team - supporting our young people moving into adulthood

- 1.17 The Pathways team is a stable team and all managers will be permanent from August 2025. Our updated Care Leavers Offer is progressing and will soon move to the Corporate Parenting Board in July. This will include additional support to for Wi-Fi, keep in touch support, increased university and masters level support.

Safeguarding & Care Planning, Children with Disabilities, Aspire and Pre-birth Team

- 1.18 The Safeguarding & Care Planning team support children on a Child in Need and Child Protection plans, as well as children that are looked after for up to six months. Our Aspire team sits within this team and focusses on supporting children who are vulnerable to exploitation, trafficking or falling into criminal activity. We continue to monitor closely the number of children allocated to social workers and have seen an increase as children require allocation swiftly from assessment within our Safeguarding and Care Planning Teams. These numbers are higher than we would like. We are continuing with the recruitment of social workers for the Edge of Care Service. The Team Manager is now in place.
- 1.19 Children with Disabilities remains stable and improvements to reporting means we have assurance around visiting patterns for children being in line with risk and need. We are supporting more children with short breaks, correlating with an increase nationally of children with recognised SEN. The new Parent Carer Forum

is now up and running and raising profile, this will give us an opportunity for some focused work with parents to identify gaps within the Local Offer and Short Breaks offer to inform future commissioning,

- 1.20 The review of our Harm Outside the Home approach across the system highlighted some strengths and areas for development to practice further strengthen practice in the Aspire Team. I am sighted on this work regularly. Nationally the team received recognition for its work with the Police in securing a conviction against a Trafficker, who we know was involved in Organised Crime Gangs that were targeting some of our young people. The team has accepted invitations to visit to local authorities, one locally and one in London to talk about how this was achieved through effective partnership alongside our colleagues in the Police. I'd like to offer my thanks to the team for this work.

Residential and Supported Accommodation

- 1.21 Work is underway to stabilise our residential homes, improving quality and implementing a new practice model. Staff have been embracing this new model and report significant impact on the children they care for. The focus is on ensuring all our homes are graded as "good" as a minimum.
- 1.22 Gleneagles - our short breaks provision - has had a full inspection and received an overall grading of "good". Holly lodge had a full inspection in April and received an overall grading of "good" as did Future for Families. This is a much-improved picture as both of these homes were previously rated as requiring improvement. I'd like to thank staff for their hard work in achieving this.

Learning, Review and Development

- 1.22 Improving the quality and consistency of practice is a priority for Children's Services as a whole. Our Quality Assurance team have developed and timetabled training and delivered one-to-one support to practitioners in relation to best practice. Audit training for all managers who undertake them has taken place and we are seeing improvements in the quality as a result.
- 1.23 Our Participation team continues to work with our cared-for children and young people to hear from them how we can better shape and improve services. They also continue to work within local schools, canvassing the views of Middlesbrough children and young people. The refreshed Participation Strategy aims to increase their reach across Middlesbrough's children and young people. Additionally, the team is preparing an annual forecast of events to support increased engagement by allowing people to free up their diaries in advance. The team have also developed QR codes to invite feedback from our children, young people, their parents, carers, and professionals. This is due to go live at the end of this month and will be incorporated into the quality assurance reporting to inform service development.

2. THE TIME AHEAD

- 2.1 I will continue to support Children's Services with its work to improve practice across the service through my work at the Children's Improvement Board and directly with service leads.
- 2.2 We are working on plans for a Carer Leavers' Hub to support our young people as they leave our care. The refreshed Care Leavers' strategy will be discussed at the Corporate Parenting Panel, which I now chair.

- 2.3 I will be working to ensure changes of senior leadership are smooth and continue our record of stabilising Children's Services and creating a supportive culture amongst our workforce. I would like to thank all our staff for their hard work in keeping young people safe and giving them the best start in life.