

EXECUTIVE MEMBER REPORT TO COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: Executive Member for Children's Services

DATE OF MEETING: 10 September 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:** 559
- **Number of foster carers with Middlesbrough Council:** 54 foster carers, 91 connected carers, looking after a total of 80 children.
- **Number of children in our care:** 490
- **Percentage of children in our care attending school:** 84.97% of all children. (KS1 - 94.6%, KS2 - 97.3%, KS3 - 81.7%, KS4 - 69.) 67.8% of 16- to 19-year-olds in Employment, education and training. (overall figures for the school year.)

1. HIGHLIGHTS

- 1.1 I would like to pay tribute to our outgoing Executive Director for Children's Services, Joe Tynan, who left Middlesbrough Council last month. Joe has been instrumental in our improvement journey in his time in Middlesbrough. He has left the service in a far stronger position than when he joined us - with a stabilised workforce, a supportive culture for staff and a higher quality of practice, all of which is delivering better outcomes for young people. I'd like to wish Joe all the best in his future endeavours and put on record my thanks to him for the support he gave me in my role. In advance of Joe's successor – Annabel Bates - commencing work later in the year, we are being supported by Pam Allen as an interim Director of Children's Services. Pam has a wealth of experience and is helping to ensure continuity through the transition.
- 1.2 I have attended excellent meetings with partner organisations, including Outwood Grange Academies Trust, SHiFT, Youth Justice, Cleveland Police and MVDA to discuss how we can improve partnership working and deliver better outcomes for young people.
- 1.3 I continue to provide oversight and challenge in the regular meetings of the Children's Improvement Board, the Children's Services Budget session and the You Matter TO Us Corporate Parenting Panel.

2. Early Help via the Stronger Families Service

- 2.1 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.
- 2.2 The workforce continues to be stable in Early Help. Workload is continuing to go down in Early Help due to reviews of cases that have been open over nine months. In my last report, the figure was 17.6 children per FTE, it is now at 17.2 children – this is the second lowest average in the last 12 months. These lower caseloads for each practitioner are reflected in the performance of the team where targets are consistently met.
- 2.3 Stronger Families will be delivering on the Tees Valley Youth Trailblazer Programme. This is a programme funded by national Government to help young people aged 18 – 21 years old who are not in education, employment, or training. Tees Valley is one of eight UK locations selected to run a trailblazer programme. Eligible young people will be identified in Middlesbrough and supported to access work placements/work experience that has been identified as a barrier to securing employment.

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

- 3.1 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.
- 3.2 We are working hard to implement improvements to the service which were recommended following reviews undertaken since March 2025. This month has seen a new leadership team in the front door and the service improvement plan is being worked through. Work is being undertaken to strengthen partnership working and stabilise the threshold – to make sure children and their families are receiving the right support at the right time. A key focus of work in the MACH has been in relation to a timely response for some of our most vulnerable children, where data is showing that this has improved significantly since early this year.
- 3.3 The team have focused on the quality of assessments and ensuring that all children are seen during the course of their assessment as well as ensuring this assessment is proportionate to the needs of the family and not process driven. This is a work in progress, but we have seen significant improvement in this area which is positive.
- 3.4 Moving forward, we will continue to drive these early improvements. We have a large cohort of interim staff in the front door but the workforce is stable.
- 3.5 I am pleased with the progress the service is making to get things right for children and families in Middlesbrough. I have received comments from partners who gave highly positive feedback of improvements made. I will continue to receive regular update reports and through the Children's Improvement Board, which meets monthly.

4. Fostering

- 4.1 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

4.2 The updated Kinship Care Offer has been completed, and media campaigns have started regarding Kinship Care in Middlesbrough. This includes a questionnaire to carers, which has been a good response rate so far, along with raising awareness for kinship carers in our area, who are not known to us.

4.3 Collaboration with Foster with Northeast (FwNE) has approval to continue until end of March 2026. The work has continued, with consideration of fee harmonisation, which the Fostering Network is leading on, on behalf of the DfE. An outcome to this work is anticipated in autumn 2025. At this time, it is not possible to provide an analysis of the potential risks to Middlesbrough, until the outcome of this work is known.

5. Cared for Children

5.1 Within Middlesbrough there are currently 490 children who are cared for. Staff are working hard to make sure children are not in care for longer than they need to be. For too long we saw cases not reviewed frequently enough and children missing out on being reunified with family as a result. Plans for all cared for children are reviewed at a monthly panel. When a potential option to obtain a different Order arises, the process commences to consider changing a child's plan, completing relevant updated assessments and to seek approval from senior leaders, before progressing to Court. Reunification has continued with currently 8 children progressing to Court and a date is awaited for the hearings, with a further 3 continuing towards a plan to either discharge the Care Order in favour of a lesser order or returning to the care of their parents.

5.2 I'm pleased to report that, from September 2025, all manager posts in this area will be permanent staff - the Head of Service, Service Manager and 4 Team Managers. This has been a significant change for the service, where historically, these posts were covered by agency staff. Due to the stable leadership in the service, we have also seen an increase in Social Workers taking up permanent posts. In April 2024 of the available 23 Social Worker posts, only 4 had permanent staff. By October 2025, there will be only 5 agency workers in the service. A combination of recruiting experienced workers externally, as well as holding posts for newly-qualified ASYE workers, as well as agency Social Workers converting to a permanent role has brought about these changes. Current remaining agency workers are also looking into the option to become permanent as well.

6. Pathways team - supporting our young people moving into adulthood

6.1 The Pathways team is a stable team and all managers will be permanent from August 2025.

6.2 Our updated Care Leavers Offer had previously been agreed at DMT, but did not progress to Corporate Parenting Board in July 2025 as planned, as this meeting was not quorate. This update had been in relation to support to have access to Wi-Fi, keep in touch support, increased university, and master's level support. Training for Personal Advisors is going ahead in September 2025 as planned.

6.3 We are working on plans to deliver a Care Leavers Hub, which is a key area of work, is progressing after issues with potential locations. It is a really important thing to deliver before any future inspection. An interim plan is currently being costed.

6.4 We are in the final stages of securing an agreement with other councils in the North East for a reciprocal arrangement for care experienced young people living in the North East to be exempt from Council Tax.

6.5 Middlesbrough has now signed up to the Care Leavers Covenant and plans will be put in place to ensure care experienced young people will have access to opportunities and cost reductions for a range of activities and resources. This will also give us an opportunity, with the Care Leavers Covenant support, to work with local business to develop apprenticeships for this specific cohort of young people.

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

7.1 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.

7.2 We continue to monitor closely the number of children allocated to social workers which has continued to rise. Our Edge of Care service was due to be operational by the summer but due to difficulties in recruitment of social workers, in line with the national challenge. As a result, we are considering an alternative model and approach in order to provide an Edge of Care service that is much needed. This service will respond across the threshold of need in crisis and in planned work and over the coming weeks we will finalise this proposal as an alternative model that will still provide the intervention required to prevent children coming into care when it is safe to do so.

7.3 The Interim Service Manager for Harm Outside The Home is now in post and our Missing and Risk and Resilience Team have transitioned from Education and Partnerships to Children's Care. The HOTH model is now being implemented, and we are working regionally to launch the approach Tees Wide. The Service Manager has conducted a service review and completed a vision for adolescents in Middlesbrough who are at risk of/experiencing exploitation that works more collaboratively across the system, the vision is to increase resources for more young people and support them out of the cycle.

8. Residential and Supported Accommodation

8.1 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.

8.2 The focus is on ensuring all our homes are graded as "good" as a minimum. At the beginning of the year, we had three homes rated as "good" with two rated "requires improvement" and one as "inadequate." Last report, I highlighted how Holly Lodge had moved from inadequate to "good", Future for Families had moved from "requires improvement" to "good" and Gleneagles had retained its "good" rating.

8.3 I'm thrilled to report that Fir Tree has been inspected and judged to be "good." We have made significant strides in this area with seven out of eight homes being rated as "good." I'd like to thank all our staff who have worked so hard to secure these improvements for the young people in our care.

8.4 We are reviewing the purpose of two of our homes to make sure we are using them as efficiently as possible. At present, Occupancy is 77% this is a slight drop from the previous month of 80% and is due to the temporary closure of Holly Lodge children's home. This is due to the change in purpose and recruitment of staff. The plan is to reopen the home on the 8.9.25 with one child initially.

8.5 The service is in the process of recruiting to vacant posts. Currently there are 20 vacancies. The service is doing this via a specialist recruitment agency to have pace and the right candidates as previous recruitment has not enabled the right candidates thus far.

9. Learning, Review and Development

9.1 Bexley, our Sector Led Improvement Partners (SLIP), recently spent some time getting to know our Quality Assurance team, framework, and processes. They provided some positive feedback about the work being completed, provided some helpful suggestions and we are very proud to say that they also took some learning away for their own Quality Assurance service.

9.2 The Quality Assurance team continues to deliver training informed by audit findings, alongside their audit activities and delivery of the QA Framework. They are also very excited to be involved in the support behind the scenes for the delivery and embedding of our new practice model, Safeguarding Together.

9.3 The Social Work Academy is getting ready for the next cohort of Newly Qualified Social Workers commencing, with a full induction timetable ready for their arrival on the 8 September. Our two Frontline units are also getting ready to welcome our next set of unqualified students, also due to start with us on the 8 September 2025.

9.4 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 and in the process of recruiting for further care ambassadors and young people volunteers. They also continue to work within local schools, canvassing the views of Middlesbrough children and young people.

9.5 We have also now launched QR codes to invite feedback from our children, young people, their parents, carers, and professionals at the point of involvement when transferring from one service area to another or ceasing. This will be incorporated into the quality assurance reporting to inform service development. Further QR codes are being developed to create specificity for areas such as MACH, residential and resources.

10. THE TIME AHEAD

10.1 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.

10.2 I will work with officers to get the Carer Leavers' Hub and refreshed Care Leavers' strategy back on track.

10.3 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.