

EXECUTIVE MEMBER UPDATE TO COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: Councillor Luke Henman - Executive Member for Children's Services

DATE OF MEETING: 15 October 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:** 56 foster carers looking after 199 children, 48 connected carers, looking after a total of 63 children
- **Number of children in our care:** 502
- **Percentage of children in our care attending school:** 86.4% of all children. primary school age - 92.9%. Secondary school - 79.3%. Post 16 in education, employment and training - 63.3%.

1. HIGHLIGHTS

1.1 Early Help via the Stronger Families Service

1.1.1 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.

1.1.2 The workforce continues to be stable in early help. The average caseload size within Early Help is now 18.1% children per FTE which is an increase on the previous month. During August, there were 109 children opened and 85 closed. Compliance within the teams is consistently met, across all target areas. In August:

- 93% of families were contacted within 3 days of allocation into the early help service. This swift response ensures that families engage with Early Help, and we had no families who declined Early Help services in August.
- 90% of children were seen within timescales for direct work in August (minimum every 4 weeks).

- 98% of children had a My Family Plan completed within timescale in August, Family Feedback informs us that Families feel involved and have ownership of their plan.

1.1.3 The Tees Valley Youth Trailblazer is a new programme to help young people into work and training. Young people across Tees Valley are to benefit from a landmark new training and employment programme to unlock their potential and build the career they want. Tees Valley is one of eight UK locations selected to run a UK Youth Guarantee Trailblazer, a UK Government-funded programme providing up to £5 million to support youth employment. High-quality paid work placements and non-paid work taster sessions will be provided for young people aged 18-21 across the region who are not in work, education or training.

1.1.4 Eligible young people are now being urged to sign up to the scheme while local businesses are being called on to provide placements, which will be critical in tackling a lack of work experience which acts as a barrier to employment. The Trailblazer programme includes structured, paid work experience placements. There will be financial support for IT equipment and travel and a two-week course at the employment hub to prepare people to engage with work.

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

1.2.1 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.

1.2.2 Earlier this month, I attended our Middlesbrough Children's Improvement Board which included a deep dive into the MACH and Assessment Services. The session demonstrated that we have continued with our improvements in MACH and are starting to see a more consistent threshold in decision making. Timescales have greatly improved as was seen in most recent improvement board. This means we are getting the right services to the right children at the right time in a greater number of cases.

1.2.3 Closer co-ordination with partners is key as we continue to see some fragmentation within our partner network. We are leading a cross-partnership training event in relation to thresholds in October 2025 to make sure all partners are on the same page. Our Head of Service is working to strengthen relationships by meeting with leaders across the partnerships.

1.2.4 I was impressed by discussions about a new approach being developed called the team around the school model which will help schools drawn down support for children at an earlier point.

1.2.5 The Assessment Service continues to hold strategy meetings and early anecdotal evidence is that there is a more proportionate outcome to the concerns coming into MACH. Staff have focused on increased visiting to children and management oversight in our improvement work this month. We are starting to receive some positive feedback from families and also schools in relation to some of the changes we have made and social workers are also giving positive feedback.

1.3 Learning, Review and Development

1.3.1 Audit return numbers have remained positive, reflecting strong engagement across the service. However, the quality of audits continues to be an area for development. To support this, a new Moderation Panel will commence in October, made up of Heads of Service. This will increase their input and oversight in the audit process, while also

strengthening their capacity to address audit skills and outcomes within their own service areas. Additionally, individual audit actions are now automatically pulled into case file supervision records, enhancing Team Managers' oversight and ensuring follow-through on identified actions.

1.3.2 Our Social Work Academy is supporting its Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs) as they settle into the academy and begin their initial training as they await confirmation of their Social Work England registrations. A new temporary Team Manager joined the academy on 19th August to cover sickness and maternity leave. They are already developing positive relationships across Children's Social Care and working closely with teams to ensure that NQSWs are supported to meet the needs of children and young people, while gaining valuable experience. Our two Frontline units have also welcomed a new cohort of students, who are settling in well as they embark on the first steps of their social work careers.

1.3.3 The Review and Development Unit continues to experience some long-term sickness. Despite this, the team remains committed to ensuring that appropriate challenge is made in the best interests of our children and young people. The temporary agency IRO, through the capacity it provides, has ensured IROs maintain the improvements made in reducing meeting minute backlogs and sustaining service stability.

1.3.4 Our Participation team is actively planning Halloween and Christmas parties for our cared-for and care-experienced young people. They are also in the midst of recruiting new volunteers and care ambassadors to further strengthen the voice of young people in service development. As part of this they have also developed an induction programme to ensure our volunteers and ambassadors have clear guidance and expectations relevant to the roles. Their work in local schools continues, gathering the views of Middlesbrough's children and young people to inform future improvements.

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

1.4.1 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.

1.4.2 The numbers of children allocated to social workers has continued to rise which is placing pressure on our staff and their time though we are clear that the priority is seeing children within timescale and assuring ourselves that we understand their lived experiences. We are working with our social workers across the teams to consider how to maximise impact they have with the limited time they can spend with them. The delay in the implementation of our edge of care model and the difficulty in recruiting contribute to the challenge. To further mitigate the risk that is aligned to higher numbers of children allocated we have considered the tasks undertaken by qualified social worker that could be performed by alternatively qualified staff, a particular demand of the service as time spent supervising family time, which is an integral part of care planning and the most significant aspect of the care plan for most children in our care. We have begun service wide discussions to alleviate this pressure whilst not jeopardising relationships and consistency for children and their families.

1.4.3 We have updated and agreed the operating model for our Edge of Care service which is to be named Families Together. The aim is to recruit more successfully by reducing the number of qualified social worker and increasing the number of alternatively qualified staff, this will enable more response to crisis across the threshold, supporting other social

workers in other areas of the service to stabilise children at home and in placements, whilst dedicated social worker provide more focused support with some families. We will now actively recruit to this model over the coming weeks and months.

1.4.4 For Children with Disabilities we are continuing to review our Short Break offer, including in house and what we commission. We have met with the Parent Carer Forum this month and updated them, asking for their input into this review, which they are keen to be involved in to ensure we can consult and co-produce the offer.

1.4.5 In December we will commence staff training Harm Outside The Home conferencing, an approach that will ensure we adapt the children protection process for those children at risk of exploitation. This is in line with the Tess Valley approach.

1.5 Cared for Children

1.5.1 Within Middlesbrough there are currently 502 children who are cared for across the teams, including Safeguarding and Care Planning and Assessment. Work continues in the service regarding the reunification of children who no longer need a Care Order. So far this financial year, we have reunified or changed orders for 16 children, either returning children to their parents or to extended family members. We have maintained lower caseloads for Social Workers, and this is enabling staff to work effectively with children, young people, families and their care teams. The service continues to be in a positive position with staffing, with agency numbers in the service continuing to reduce.

1.6 Pathways team - supporting our young people moving into adulthood

1.6.1 There are two staff moving to take on new roles and recruitment is underway. The team has remained stable overall. We are looking at how we respond to the increased number of young people becoming eligible for this service ensuring it remains fit for purpose. Work is also underway with the Care Leavers Covenant, with meetings planned in October, to develop the offer to local businesses and encourage the opportunities for care experienced young people to access apprenticeships and employment opportunities.

1.7 Fostering

1.7.1 There are 74 mainstream carers, including respite carers. 56 of these carers are providing care to 199 children on a short or long-term basis. There are 48 connected carers providing care for 63 children. The post Order Kinship Team has its launch this month. The service is also currently assessing 6 mainstream foster carers.

1.7.2 Discussions are ongoing with the collaboration with Foster with North East (FwNE). 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 delayed but expected in October 2025, for the region. 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.

2. THE TIME AHEAD

- 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
- I will work to organise events for corporate parents to participate in Care Leavers' Month
- 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