

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

A meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board was held on Wednesday 22 October 2025.

PRESENT: Councillors L Young (Chair), J Ewan (Vice-Chair), D Branson, E Clynych, D Coupe, J Kabuye, L Lewis, T Mohan, I Morrish, J Platt, M Saunders, Z Uddin, G Wilson and J Young

PRESENT BY INVITATION: Councillor L Henman, Executive Member for Children's Services

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: Councillor S Platt

OFFICERS: P Allen and S Lightwing

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: None submitted.

25/26 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest received at this point in the meeting.

25/27 **MINUTES - OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD - 17 SEPTEMBER 2025**

The minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting held on 17 September 2025 were submitted and approved as a correct record, subject to the following amendments:

Minute No 25/20 – Fourth paragraph, last sentence in relation to the date of the next meeting of the Place Scrutiny Panel should read “27 October” rather than “20 October”.

Minute No 25/21 – Nineth paragraph, third sentence after “ordinarily” add: “them”.

Further to a request from the Board for details of the total number of young people engaged in the Youth Justice System, the Democratic Services Manager stated there were approximately 90 children open to youth justice in Middlesbrough who were active cases. Support was also provided to children in police custody and this figure did not include those children or the ones supported at Court.

25/28 **SCRUTINY CHAIRS UPDATE**

Scrutiny Panel Chairs were invited to provide their updates to OSB.

The Chair of the Place Scrutiny Panel advised the Board that the Final Report on Home to School Transport had recently been presented to the Executive. The Place Scrutiny Panel would monitor the executive actions agreed going forward. The Place Panel last met on 29 September and agreed the Terms of Reference for the scrutiny investigation into Barriers to Regeneration. At the next meeting of the Executive on 12 November 2025, the Chair would be presenting the Panel's Final Report on Empty Properties for consideration.

The Chair of the Children's Scrutiny Panel informed the Board that the next meeting was scheduled for 27 October 2025. The Panel would be continuing its investigation into Out of Area Specialist Provision, receiving further evidence in relation to Workforce Development Strategy (SEND and Inclusion) and how this had assisted in maintaining children in Middlesbrough education provision. The Panel would also consider the Terms of Reference for the review.

The Chair of the Adult Social Care and Health Scrutiny Panel advised OSB the Panel had last met on 20 October 2025. The Panel had agreed their Terms of Reference for the review of Healthy Placemaking with a Focus on Childhood Obesity and had also received a presentation on Healthy Placemaking through Transport and Infrastructure.

NOTED

25/29

EXECUTIVE MEMBER UPDATE - CHILDREN'S SERVICES

The Chair welcomed the Executive Member for Children's Services, who was accompanied by the Interim Executive Director.

The Executive Member was invited to deliver his presentation. The Chair reminded Members not to discuss individual casework and to ask any questions they had at the end of each slide.

The Executive Member had been in post for almost twelve months and the permanent Executive Director of Children's Services had been in post for eight days. There would be a handover period prior to the Interim Executive Director leaving the Authority.

Children's Services Mission Statement was shared as follows:

- Keep children and young people at the heart of our work.
- Work together to get the best outcomes for our children, young people and families.
- Learn from what we do to improve the experience for young people and families.
- Work together with integrity trusting each other in an open and honest manner and exercising moral courage in all that we do.
- Work in a way that is creative , developing new ideas to deliver a better future for children's young people and their families.
- When safeguarding services are necessary and children need protecting, we ensure they are cared for well as any good parent would do.
- Our aim is to keep our children looked after in the community that they know best and where they have a sense of belonging.

Members were updated on key numbers in relation to children and families and the Executive Member highlighted that there had been a reduction in the number of children looked after from 504 since he last presented the data to the Overview and Scrutiny Board in January 2025.

- Number of families accessing Early Help – 658.
- Number of child and family assessments being completed – 297.
- Number of children subject to Child in Need Plans – 418.
- Number of children subject to Child Protection Plans – 350.
- Number of children looked after by Middlesbrough Council – 494.

In relation to the 494 children looked after by Middlesbrough Council, a breakdown was provided of their current situation. This included for example, the numbers of those in foster care, living in residential homes both in and outside of Middlesbrough, in secure accommodation etc. It was noted that there were currently 97 children in foster care and 112 with connected carers. These figures had increased since January and this reflected some of the really important work that had taken place with carers. There had also been a reduction in children living in residential homes that were outside of Middlesbrough and an increase in those within Middlesbrough. The Council had recently re-opened Holly Lodge and had been able to bring children back from other placements.

It was noted that there were also private sector residential homes operating within the town. Other local authorities who placed children into private homes were bound to inform Middlesbrough Council. However, Middlesbrough Council did not have any responsibilities towards those children.

A Member acknowledged that whilst it was good to see the number of children looked after reducing, since the 2022-2023 there has been a £20 million increase in the Children's Services budget with an £8 million overspend currently forecast. The Interim Executive Director explained that sadly the number of foster care and independent foster care agency places had reduced. This meant that more children, often with complex needs, were being accommodated in residential placements, which were more expensive. This was a national issue and not unique to Middlesbrough.

The Executive Member added that some children had issues in relation to emotional wellbeing, who might have suffered significant trauma in their lives and had a tendency to self-

harm or become violent. These children needed multiple members of staff to care for them and keep them and other people safe. Unfortunately, there were often a lot of complexities that resulted in significant care costs.

In relation to children who were adopted, some allowances continued to be paid, especially for those with additional needs or a sibling group. It was difficult to say whether there was a backlog of children awaiting adoption as it was now a regional process. Middlesbrough Council would present children to a regional panel who would look for all available carers. This was an advantage where the preference was for children not to be adopted within Middlesbrough. Babies were usually adopted quite quickly up to the age of eighteen months, after two years there was often more of a delay and once aged three to four, it was more likely that children would stay with foster carers than be adopted. Twenty one Middlesbrough children had been adopted during the last year. The Court had commended Middlesbrough Council on the fact that 93% of care proceedings had been completed within 26 weeks which was good for children, adoptive carers and families.

It was explained Connected Carers were family and friends who stepped in to provide care in emergencies. A rapid assessment would be completed within twenty-four hours. A foster carer assessment would then be completed over the next six weeks and if successful, a Special Guardianship Order would be applied for and they would then become Kinship Carers.

The Executive Member outlined the priorities that Children's Services were focussing on to drive up results for young people which included:

- Leadership, Vision and Culture.
- Quality of Practice.
- Partnerships.
- Workforce Stability and Development.
- Corporate Parenting and Care Leavers Support.

The Executive Member commented that a few years ago, Children's Services were in a point of crises and it was very difficult for any organisation to get out of that. The Service was now in a very different place and fixing some of the foundations that would improve quality and consistency of practice by:

- Increasing the Voice of the Child in reporting.
- Making sure reports were consistent and included the right detail.
- Focussing on reflective practice, practice weeks and learning.
- Children's homes had been rated "good" by OFSTED."

The Executive Member attended the Children's Improvement Board monthly to look at how data was improving. The Executive Member also attended other events such as the Practice Week where he had thanked staff for the work they were doing. It was important to improve the culture of reflection and the Executive Member also ensured he was involved in preparations for OFSTED inspections.

The next steps to improve quality of practice included:

- Embedding the new practice model.
- Strengthening relationships with partners and understanding of thresholds.
- Continuing to support improvements to the Multi-Agency Children's Hub (MACH).
- Launch the Edge of Care Service.

The new practice model was about consistency and working with parents and carers at the time they needed support and to solve problems quickly.

The Edge of Care Service was a preventative service working with young people who were on the verge of formal care proceedings. There had been some staff recruitment issues that had delayed the launch. The Harm Outside the Home Team was also working alongside the Service.

Another priority for Children's Services was workforce stability. There had been a reduction in substantive posts filled by agency staff which was positive news. 33% of agency staff had

converted to permanent posts at the Council which more cost effective and better for delivering services.

The Executive Member highlighted the recent appointment of the new Executive Director for Children's Services and the transition arrangements from the current Interim Executive Director. The Executive Member also attended wellbeing events for staff where their contributions were acknowledged and celebrated. Work would continue on reducing caseloads and recruiting to harder to fill posts.

The new Care Leavers Hub had recently opened to provide support to young people as they transitioned into adulthood and prepared to leave care.

The Executive Member chaired the Council's You Matter To Us Corporate Parenting Board and was looking to focus on single issues at future meetings, such as housing, to try and do a deep dive into those issues. Young People were involved on the Board and there were also informal meetings. The Executive Member reminded Councillors that they were all Corporate Parents and would be welcome to attend Board meetings.

The Service was also focussing on providing care and support in the right place and at the right level by creating more flexibility in the admission criteria within the children's home and striving to keep more looked after children living within Middlesbrough.

There had been a successful Family Reunification Project which had seen 16 Care Orders discharged and children moved back home. The project had also resulted in a significant saving in care costs of £463,000.

It was acknowledged that the Council needed to recruit more foster carers by removing some of the barriers that existed and providing more incentives. One suggestion was whether a reduction in Council Tax for foster carers could be explored. The Executive Member stated that social media was a useful platform for promoting fostering and he was keen to work with Councillors to provide some resources that could be shared.

In terms of assurance the Executive Member outlined that:

- Performance meetings took place monthly with the senior management team and Executive Member.
- Head of Service presented a deep dive within their area with Key Performance Indicators and narrative.
- Transformation meetings occurred monthly, with challenge and confirmation from the Programme Management Office Senior Business Advisors.
- Officers had weekly Budget meetings with the Section 151 Officer.
- Budget challenge events with the Executive Member.

The Council's overall budget for 2025-2026 was £143.3 million with 39% allocated to Children's Services (£56 million). Pressures on the budget included record levels of complexity and demand within children's social care, looked after children living out of area and the use of agency social work staff. Actions to respond to pressures were listed as follows:

- Children's Services controls included a change in delegated authority. Any placement over £7k per week to be agreed by Director of Social Care or the Executive Director of Children's Services.
- Residential Panel and Resource Panel to consider best value for money and encourage staff to understand the relationship between the cost and the outcomes for the child.
- To positively encourage agency staff to take permanent contracts .
- To offer 'acting up opportunities' in preference to interim agency staff where appropriate.
- Review by Interim DCS of each child living in residential placements out of authority.

On behalf of the Board, the Chair thanked the Executive Member and the Interim Director for their presentation.

ORDERED that the information provided was received and noted.

25/30

EXECUTIVE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair introduced the report for the Board's consideration. A copy of the Work Programme was attached at Appendix A and Members were asked to raise any issues they had in relation to any of the items listed.

Members identified several entries on the Forward Plan which they felt required more information. Those items were:

- Development of Middlehaven Proposals to commence preparatory work for the comprehensive redevelopment of Middlehaven – information was requested in terms of the consultation arrangements.
- Investment in Homelessness Proposals for investment alongside a social investor to purchase properties to reduce the expenditure on temporary accommodation – clarification as to the £6 million grant funding.
- Middlesbrough Street Security Approval to enter into a funding agreement with TVCA to deliver 3 year pilot – confirmation that this project was on track.

ORDERED that:

1. The Democratic Services Manager would request further information from the relevant Service Areas relating to the following entries on the Forward Plan:
 - Development of Middlehaven Proposals to commence preparatory work for the comprehensive redevelopment of Middlehaven.
 - Investment in Homelessness Proposals for investment alongside a social investor to purchase properties to reduce the expenditure on temporary accommodation.
 - Middlesbrough Street Security Approval to enter into a funding agreement with TVCA to deliver 3 year pilot.

The report was noted.

25/31

FORWARD PLAN ACTIONS PROGRESS

The Democratic Services Manager informed the Board that there were no actions to update for this meeting.

25/32

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

None.