

EXECUTIVE MEMBER UPDATE TO COUNCIL

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

DATE OF MEETING: 26 November 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 children accessing early help via Middlesbrough Council:** 545.
- **Number of foster carers with Middlesbrough Council:** 71 foster carers, 26 connected carers.
- **Number of children in our care:** 509.
- **Percentage of children in our care attending school (since the start of the school year):** all children 86.5%, primary-aged children 94.3%, secondary-aged children 78.5%, post-16 65.8%.

1. HIGHLIGHTS

1.1 Leadership within Children's Services

- 1.1.1 Our permanent Executive Director of Children's Services started with us on 13 October and has been working with leaders across her teams, colleagues across the Council and our partners to review service delivery and identify immediate and long-term priorities. I'm pleased to welcome her to Middlesbrough Council and I am looking forward to working with her – we have had opportunity to sit down several times so far and discuss how we continue our improvement journey and improve outcomes for young people in our care.
- 1.1.2 Over coming months leaders will continue to implement the new practice model across children's services, to ensure that all children and young people in Middlesbrough have access to high quality support and care.

1.2 Early Help via the Stronger Families Service

- 1.2.1 We deliver early help to children via our Stronger Families Service. The service supports families early in order to reduce the number of young people being taken into care. Providing early help to families in order to keep children in a safe home is better for the child's wellbeing and it improves their long-term outcomes.
- 1.2.2 All children coming into early help are allocated and access support in a timely manner.

- 1.2.3 In September 95 children opened to the early help service and involvement with 136 children closed. Of those children where involvement closed, 90% had positive outcomes achieved. The other 10% were all children that moved out of area prior to closing. In those cases, the service referred the families to early help service within the receiving local authority.
- 1.2.4 Most of our early help cases (67%) are held by the partnership. The cases held by partners are tracked by the early help team so that we can effectively coordinate the proportion of children being supported at an early help threshold. In September 2025, 1121 children were receiving early help support from the following services: health partners, schools and education settings, The Junction, Seen Heard Believed, Recovery Solutions, Housing, Middlesbrough Football Club and other community partners.
- 1.2.5 The Stronger Families service currently commissions the following support services: The Junction, Middlesbrough Football Club and Linx. These services provide youth provision, targeted support and transitions support to young people.
- 1.2.6 The service is currently undertaking a consultation with young people to inform the new youth offer for 2027, which will be informed by the voice of young people. The consultation will also involve stakeholders and families. This is a collaborative consultation which includes partners such as health, neighborhoods, schools and the youth mutual.
- 1.2.7 The service also commissions services from We are Amity. The organisation has trained staff within children's services in factors relating to parental conflict and the impact it can have on children and young people. Over the next six months teams within schools and the voluntary sector will also receive training.

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

- 1.3.1 Within the MACH improvement work with the partnership is focused on increasing the physical presence in the front door. Our Department for Education assigned Sector Led Improvement Partners have audited 10 files in the front door and early reporting highlights that there continue to be some inconsistencies around threshold from the partnership. Threshold briefings on behalf of the local safeguarding children's partnership in order to improve practice and partnership ways of working.
- 1.3.2 The MACH strategic board is meeting regularly, with strong buy in at a strategic level of the partnership. Improving the impact of the strategic board remains an area of improvement.
- 1.3.3 Within the assessment service significant work is being undertaken around practice improvement, as part of the development of our new practice model. A clear plan is in place and improvements are being made which are being measured through audit.
- 1.3.4 Leaders report that they feel safer in their practice and well held by management, with the approach of high support and high challenge. A managers' away day has been held to support with developing clear plans and having a shared vision for the service.

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 number of children being allocated plans remains high. Children coming from the assessment service continue to be allocated in a timely way to ensure there is no gap in provision, and that risk and need are clearly managed. Reallocation of duties has enabled us to increase time available for social workers to work with children. Although these changes have led to improvements, the volume of family time that social workers are undertaking is still significant and impacting on delivery of other aspects of their work such as direct work with children and undertaking interventions with families.
- 1.4.3 At the end of October, we held our service wide Promoting Purposeful Practice session for Autumn. Here we revisited work to be undertaken with children to increase their awareness of why they have a social worker and how they influence their plans and planning going forward. We are seeing growing evidence of children writing their own plans on their files. The next step is to involve the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in this work, so that children's plans are discussed and considered in key conferences and reviews. Within this session we focused on review points, decision-making and communication with children.
- 1.4.4 In December we will commence training for Social Workers and IROs around harm outside the home conferencing, an approach that will ensure we adapt and utilise the child protection process for those children at risk of, or experiencing, exploitation. This is in line with the Tees Valley approach.

Fostering

- 1.4.5 The kinship team has now launched. We continue to progress moves for children to kinship carers, when their plan identifies this as appropriate. The support is being seen as positive by carers. We are seeing high demand for initial assessment of kinship carers.
- 1.4.6 Collaboration with Foster with North East will continue until end of March 2026, and a regional review of the future approach is underway. The development of a Regional Care Collaborative is being discussed by the Department for Education and DCS's across the region.

1.5 Cared for Children

- 1.5.1 Within Middlesbrough there are currently 514 children who are cared for across our teams, including Safeguarding and Care Planning and Assessment. Reunification continues with children progressing to Court change Orders. The panel which reviews children moves the plan to actively look at reunification or lesser Orders when the time is right for the child. Plans for all cared for children are reviewed at a monthly panel.
- 1.5.2 Lower caseloads for social workers have been maintained. All team manager posts are staffed by permanent workers, which is providing significant stability to the service. We have seen an increase in positive feedback from partners and stakeholders, including from judges and children's guardians. We continue to focus on increasing permanency of social workers.

1.6 Pathways team - supporting our young people moving into adulthood

- 1.6.1 We continue to have a consistent workforce in our pathways team. Demand in this service has continued to increase and additional team members will be added to

the structure this month. Currently a temporary care leavers hub is in place with a permanent venue being explored.

- 1.6.2 November is National Care Leavers Month, an opportunity to celebrate our care experienced young people and highlight their aspirations and achievements. Various events for and with our young people are taking place to raise the profile of care leavers in Middlesbrough. I organised an opportunity for several young people in our care to raise the issues that matter to them with Andy McDonald MP, the Member of Parliament for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East and Mayor Cooke. The questions raised touched on housing, the justice system, jobs, regeneration and much more. The young people were extremely articulate and put the experiences of care experienced young people front and centre. I was extremely proud of everyone who took part.



- 1.6.3 Young people also produced short film which premiered in Roxy Movies in Captain Cook Square. Over the past six months, the group aged 18–25 have worked with Middlesbrough Council's Pathways team and the Voice and Influence Manager to record their version of 'Dreams' by The Cranberries. Grass Roots Music helped coordinate the project and supported the group to develop their creative skills throughout. It was great to attend the premiere and see the film, which summed up perfectly the hope and ambition our young people have and underlined our duty as corporate parents to support them to achieve their dreams.

1.7 Residential and Supported Accommodation

- 1.7.1 An action plan is in place to address demand and cost within the Residential service. A new permanent head of service will join the team in January 2026, and they will play a key role in delivering the action plan.
- 1.7.2 Impartial internal audits of a number of residential services will be carried out by the quality support team over the coming months in order to monitor quality and support for children.
- 1.7.3 We anticipate some delays in delivery of Family Group Conferencing in the short term, as we work towards developing permanency within the team.

1.8 Learning, Review and Development

- 1.8.1 The quality assurance (QA) team continues to deliver training informed by audit findings, alongside audit activities and the implementation of our QA Framework.

- 1.8.2 All Newly Qualified Social Workers have successfully obtained their Social Work England registration. They are now fully qualified and registered and are beginning to take on increasingly complex and varied work as they progress through their Approved and Supported Year of Employment.
- 1.8.3 Our two Frontline units are settling in well and getting to know our services and local area. With the right support in place, they are beginning to develop their relational practice as they embark on the first steps of their social work careers.
- 1.8.4 I was pleased to attend the main face-to-face event of our latest Practice Week, which was held in October. The event was well attended and positively received. The overarching theme of collaboration was reflected in some strong engagement across the service, particularly at the main event, which brought together practitioners to share learning and strengthen connections. It was fantastic to see this example of our culture of reflection and improvement in action and to speak at the event, where I reiterated how proud our Council is of our staff.
- 1.8.5 The Participation Team recently delivered the annual Halloween party for our cared-for young people and is actively working across services to develop plans for Care Experienced Month in November. Alongside this, the team is focused on developing the ambassador and volunteer roles to build overall capacity and extend their reach.

2. THE TIME AHEAD

- I will continue to support Children's Services with its work to improve practice and outcomes for children and young people in Middlesbrough. I am currently working with the Executive Director of Children's Services to review our Improvement Plan and the work of the Children's Services Improvement Board.
- I will ensure that improvements being made in stabilising leadership and workforce within Children's Services are having a direct impact on service delivery, positive outcomes for children and young people, and developing sustainable strategic plans for the future.
- I would like to thank all of our staff for their hard work in keeping young people safe and giving them the best start in life.