

CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY PANEL

A meeting of the Children's Scrutiny Panel was held on 27 October 2025.

PRESENT: Councillor Clynch (Chair), Councillor Jackson (Vice Chair); Councillors: Nugent, S Platt, Romaine, Tranter and Uddin.

OFFICERS: A Bates, C Cannon, E Cowley, J Dixon and C Jones.

**** DECLARATIONS OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

Name of Member	Type of Interest	Nature of Interest
Councillor Clynch	Non-pecuniary	Employed within education setting.
Councillor Jackson	Non-pecuniary	School Governor.
Councillor Tranter	Non-pecuniary	Employed within education setting.

WELCOME AND EVACUATION PROCEDURE

The Chair welcomed those present and highlighted the Council's Fire Evacuation Procedure.

MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING OF THE CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY PANEL HELD ON 15 SEPTEMBER 2025

The Minutes of the previous meeting of the Children's Scrutiny Panel held on 15 September 2025 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

FURTHER EVIDENCE – OUT OF AREA SPECIALIST PROVISION

The Chair welcomed the new Executive Director of Children's Services, A Bates, to the meeting, alongside C Cannon, Interim Director of Education and Partnerships, and E Cowley, Head of Inclusion, Assessment and Review.

The Head of Inclusion, Assessment and Review provided the Panel with a presentation in relation to the SEND and Inclusion Workforce Development Strategy. At its previous meeting on 15 September, the Panel had indicated that this was an area for further exploration in the context of its current scrutiny review.

By way of background, the Panel heard that workforce development had been a long-term focus of the improvement work for SEND and Inclusion and formed the basis of the original Middlesbrough SEND and Disability Strategy when it was introduced in 2018. Workforce development activities covered all aspects of SEND and Inclusion across education, health and care services along with schools and settings.

The Workforce Development Strategic Group identified a number of priorities for the workforce for internal staff and wider teams across the Council, in schools and support to parents and carers. This was supported by engagement work with schools. Subsequently, a workforce development offer was introduced which included learning, core learning and developmental learning for the above groups.

A booklet had been developed with the Parent/Carer Forum to signpost parents to locally available training, support and development opportunities.

It was highlighted that there was also a strong quality assurance (QA) process for SEND and Inclusion which had driven the learning cycle in terms of workforce development. The QA process included learning from peer reviews, reviews of Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP) and

activity around case audits and learning visits to providers. Any gaps identified during the QA process were fed into the workforce development strategies.

The Panel was advised that in 2023, Middlesbrough Council received a £1.045 million grant from the Department for Education (DfE) for the roll out of the Delivering Better Value Programme. Workforce development was identified as an opportune area as part of this work, and there was a focus on staff training and development to improve workforce skills and knowledge to positively impact on outcomes for children and to sustain longer term finances.

The following actions were identified as part of the programme:-

- Developing a local area graduated response (through training and workshops to build skills and knowledge of staff and external stakeholders).
- Training, mentoring and networking opportunities for school SENCOs.
- Conferences and learning activities/events across the local area.
- Employing a Family Liaison Officer to support parent partnerships.
- Development of a SENCO handbook.
- Transitions.

A SEND Ranges document, which provided a shared understanding of SEND thresholds and the provisions that children and young people with SEND may need, was developed to support stakeholders. This contributed to a strong local area response and consistency for children with SEND to be supported locally to meet their needs.

In terms of training, mentoring and networking opportunities for school SENDCOs (Special Educational Needs/Disabilities Co-ordinator), the Panel's attention was drawn to a SENDCO development programme delivered between March and July 2024. Each of the five sessions were attended by more than 60 members of staff, with national and local experts in attendance, focussing on upskilling staff in the following areas:-

- The SEND graduated response
- SEND leadership
- Multi-agency working
- Transitions
- SEMH (social, emotional and mental health difficulties)

In addition, work had been undertaken to support a development programme for a total of 24 schools to participate in the Whole Education SEND School Improvement Programme. 'Whole Education' were national experts in SEND and evidence-based practice and worked in partnership with Tees Valley Education (the Council's delivery partner). The programme included a series of peer reviews to find out what worked well and network to share knowledge across schools.

Tees Valley Education facilitated the local SEND Network and provided mentoring, training and development opportunities for SENCOs and other key staff across Middlesbrough.

Middlesbrough had recently published its 'Ordinarily Available Inclusive Provision' document (OAIP). This provided information around support, resources and strategies available in the local area for children and young people at SEND support.

A seconded group of SENCOs had developed the SEND Ranges document, in collaboration with Education, Health and Social Care providers, which aimed to provide clarity in relation to identifying the level of need and support needed by children and young people and also consistency in approach across all settings. This would be achieved through continued practice sharing, networking and training across schools.

A SEND on-line learning hub had been developed for practitioners and families which provided access to 'bitesize' learning. This was currently a work in progress that would be developed further.

Local authority staff and supporting schools had delivered local area conferences highlighting SEND topics and inviting specialists and speakers to share skills and knowledge. Key partners included Ivson Trust, The Difference and SHiFT - each spotlighting topics such as being the parent of a child that had been exploited; exclusions and national provision; and how to build relationships and work with children to impact their outcomes.

The Panel was advised that, alongside the Delivering Better Value programme, there were a series of other key priority areas – local area priorities – where significant activity had been undertaken:-

Early Years – How best to support providers. A scoping exercise was undertaken with early years providers and multi-agency colleagues to identify training needs and training already available.

One challenge for staff working in early years settings was having the time to attend training. As a result, the original Cleveland Unit Nursery had been restructured to introduce an assessment approach with opportunities for outreach and training with the specialist team who delivered 87 hours of outreach in September.

There was a new portage offer for families of children with complex needs, through a parent-led approach.

In addition, supported via the DfE, work with Dingley's Promise to offer up to 100 free funded training places for early years staff with focus on speech and language development, emotional needs and toilet training promote school readiness.

Outreach and Inclusion – The Outreach and Inclusion Service was developed in 2021 following feedback from schools and provided support with early assessment and identification and preventative approaches to support children with SEND and those at risk of exclusion.

This model worked closely with the Designated Clinical Officer and Designated Social Care Officer to provide training, support and guidance on their health and care specialisms.

School based learning – Schools were making a significant contribution to workforce development activity by investing in supporting their own staff to complete relevant SEND training, including:

- Team Teach
- Relationship based and restorative approaches
- Attention Autism training

Specialist SEND schools including Green Lane and Beverley Park were engaged in sharing skills and knowledge across the partnership through training, outreach and workshops.

Proclaim Partnership – Comprised of 23 schools in Middlesbrough, Proclaim focussed on providing support to become trauma-informed and attachment aware in their approach. The Council's Inclusion and Specialist Support service was also part of this programme.

Preparation for Adulthood – Targeted effective person-centred planning in preparation for adulthood through planning training across the local area to achieve quality outcomes for young people. For example, facilitating supported internship and further education providers to take part in training around job coaching, and instruction to support employment outcomes. This supported young people with complex needs to develop employment skills.

There had been collaboration with Supported Internship providers to implement the Supported Internship Quality Assurance Framework.

Development Opportunities for Local Authority SEND and Inclusion Staff – Staff were supported to complete legal training, SEN Case Officer qualifications, apprenticeship opportunities, attend National Inclusion Leadership Development Programmes, webinars and conferences.

Future Workforce - Partnership work had been undertaken with Teesside University and

Middlesbrough College to consider how local area specialisms could be integrated into teacher training or training for the children's workforce.

Impact on practice and staff development – A number of direct quotes from staff were included in the presentation and generally stated that there had been a positive impact; good professional development; training had brought SEN more to the forefront in schools with improved target setting and had raised the profile of SEND in schools and outcomes for children.

The Panel was informed that the overall impact of workforce development included the following outcomes:-

- Children's needs assessed in a timely way – 98% completion for 20-week process, compared with 45.9% nationally.
- Stronger local area graduated response – 16.6% decrease in rate of referrals in Middlesbrough in 2024 compared to the previous year.
- Primary and special school suspensions below national and regional averages.
- Fewer days lost to suspension locally.
- Focus on relationships, resolution and legal compliance – tribunal rates remained below national average.
- Growing numbers of young people gaining skills for employment – consistent numbers of young people participating in supported internships.
- Number of children in out of area placements lower than national levels – supported by developing specialisms locally and improved graduated response.
- For the third year running, a reduction in the number of children permanently excluded.

In terms of the next steps, it was noted that the anticipated SEND reforms due to be announced in Autumn had been delayed until at least Spring 2026. The new SEND and Inclusion Strategy would incorporate the new reforms. In the meantime, workforce development would continue to build networks of good practice with knowledge-sharing by experts, including parents and children, which would particularly focus on early years and post-16 support, preparing young people for adult life.

A discussion ensued and the following issues were raised:-

- A Panel Member raised the issue of toilet training and had been shocked to learn of some reception age children attending school wearing nappies and it was queried whether schools worked with parents to support them to address this. The Head of Inclusion, Assessment and Review advised that family hubs and specialist staff ran workshops giving key messages around toileting, healthy eating, etc, stay and play sessions and offered support to families to come together and share a range of strategies to support their children.
- In response to a query as to how many children in Middlesbrough were recognised as SEND pupils, the Panel was advised that 15% of Middlesbrough's overall education population was recognised as SEND. This was comparable with the national average. Around 6% of children in Middlesbrough had an EHCP which was above the national average (currently 5.3%).
- A Member asked what support was available for families during school holidays. The Panel was advised that support was provided as best as possible through promotion of half term clubs to ensure some respite for families. It was confirmed, in response to a query regarding academy schools, that the Local Authority's responsibilities for children with SEND were the same for children attending academies as for those attending maintained schools and that everything discussed at the meeting was available to all schools in Middlesbrough.
- Reference was made to the 15% of the overall school population recognised with SEND and it was queried what percentage of those children were autistic. The Head of Service informed that there were various categories of need within that 15% of children, such as those with sensory loss, and those categories of need were tracked to identify any growth areas. The majority of the SEND cohort had severe learning difficulties and Middlesbrough was slightly above the national average for Autism, and social, emotional and mental health difficulties.
- It was also highlighted that research suggested that, nationally, improvement in assessments identifying needs may have impacted on the increase in those diagnosed with autism. Evidence also showed that families were facing more complex challenges with an increase in

social, emotional and mental health difficulties in Middlesbrough. Levels of deprivation also impacted on a child's development. A mix of factors such as health inequalities and social factors all played a part.

- The Executive Director commented that there was a high standard of quality data within the SEND service regarding the needs of children which could be utilised and built upon.
- The Chair added that, from personal experience working within a school, training received in relation to the trauma informed approach had been excellent and had provided staff with greater awareness of how to support young people who had experienced traumatic events and allowed them to put what they had learned into practice. It was hoped this approach by teachers would impact on reducing suspensions, which could lead to exclusions.
- A Panel Member asked how the Council responded to parents who were unwilling to engage with services, for example parents of children with SEND or parents of early years children, as previously mentioned, who were not toilet trained. It was highlighted that some schools employed staff to liaise with parents to offer guidance and support on such matters and to work with families. There was a multi-agency approach to ensure that issues were identified and understood, and a plan would be developed with the family to ensure the right support was put in place to support the child and family to achieve the best outcomes.
- It was queried how parents were encouraged to get involved. Members were advised that contact with parents was approached in a non-confrontational way usually during family run sessions such as Stay and Play where they would come into school and there would be focus on particular themes where advice, support and demonstrations were provided whilst playing and learning. For example, a recent session in one school had included a parent doing art activities with the children, this had been carefully thought out by the school and had been identified as an opportunity to develop relationships.
- It was further highlighted that early years settings had a strong partnership with health visitors. The services worked together to identify any potential developmental issues as early as possible and helped determine additional support or pathways for the child's needs together with support for parents in the immediate and longer term.
- A Panel Member sought assurance that the service was confident that everything possible was being done to work with parents to ensure their child was toilet trained ready for school. The Panel was informed that this was incorporated into the SEND and Inclusion Strategy and that it was important to keep reviewing the strategy across the whole partnership.
- Reference was made to families whose first language was not English, and it was queried how they were reached to make them aware of support opportunities. The Panel was advised that the Council's EMAT Team (Ethnic Minority Achievement Team) worked with families, including newly arrived families, in conjunction with the SEND and Inclusion service to provide information and leaflets in other languages signposting families to support. Further work was being undertaken to address the challenges of supporting families and assessing children with SEND whose first language was not English.
- In response to a query, the Panel was informed that only a small percentage, when compared with the nation average, of SEND children were educated outside of the Middlesbrough local authority boundary.

The Chair thanked the Officers for their attendance and the presentation provided.

AGREED that the information provided be noted and considered in the context of the Panel's current scrutiny topic of 'Out of Area Specialist Provision'.

POSSIBLE TERMS OF REFERENCE – DISCUSSION ITEM

The Panel was asked to consider possible Terms of Reference for its current scrutiny investigation into Out of Area Specialist Provision.

The Chair outlined that, to date, the Panel had received evidence in relation to out of area provision from an education perspective and on the SEND and Inclusion Workforce Development. The Chair proposed that this be extended to incorporate the Social Care element, including looking at the Social Care Workforce Development and that this should be incorporated into the Terms of Reference.

The Chair proposed to draft some suggested Terms of Reference with the Democratic Services Officer, to be circulated to the Panel prior to the next meeting, for comment. In the meantime, should any Panel Members have any thoughts/suggestions to be included, they should be emailed to the Democratic Services Officer.

It was highlighted that the Panel had initially suggested including the impact of pending SEND reforms within its terms of reference, however, the Government had recently announced a further delay to the SEND reforms until the new year. The Executive Director advised that the SEND reforms would form part of the Schools White Paper and suggested providing verbal updates to the Panel as and when further information was received.

It was further highlighted that there was currently a period of social care and health reforms which would affect vulnerable children and potentially how Council services were delivered as multi-agency working would be key. Again, verbal updates in relation to this could be provided to the Panel as developments unfolded.

AGREED as follows:-

1. That proposed Draft Terms of Reference be drawn up by the Chair and Democratic Services Officer for consideration and discussion at the next meeting. These would be circulated to Panel Members prior to the next meeting.
2. That the Executive Director of Children's Services provide verbal updates to the Panel, as and when appropriate, in relation to:
 - SEND Reforms/Schools White Paper
 - Social Care and Health Reforms.

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD UPDATE

The Chair provided a verbal update in relation to the business conducted at the Overview and Scrutiny Board meetings held on 17 September and 22 October 2025, namely:

OSB – 17 Sept 2025

- Scrutiny Chairs' updates.
- Executive Member for Education & Culture - Provided a presentation on activity within each of the areas of her portfolio.
- Executive Forward Plan.
- Progress on Forward Plan actions:-
 - Development of Middlehaven Proposals to commence preparatory work for the comprehensive redevelopment of Middlehaven.
 - Capital Investment in Council Buildings Proposals to invest in major reconfiguration and repair of Council buildings.
 - Investment in Homelessness Proposals for investment alongside a social investor to purchase properties to reduce the expenditure on temporary accommodation.
- Discussion and agreement on Terms of Reference for its review of "Poverty, its impact and efforts to tackle it".

OSB – 22 Oct 2025

- Scrutiny Chairs' updates.
- Executive Member for Children's Services - Provided a presentation on activity within his portfolio.
- Executive Forward Plan
- Progress on Forward Plan Actions.
- Next meeting of OSB – Wednesday, 19 November at 4.30pm.

DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Children's Scrutiny Panel was scheduled for Monday, 8 December at 4.30pm.

The Chair highlighted that the next meeting would consider the statutory annual update from the South Tees Safeguarding Children Partnership and requested agreement from Members to move the January meeting from 19 to 26 January 2026 at 4.30pm

AGREED that the January meeting of the Scrutiny Panel be moved to Monday, 26 January 2026 at 4.30pm.