

EXECUTIVE MEMBER UPDATE TO COUNCIL

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

DATE OF MEETING: 14th January 2026

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:** 550
- **Number of foster carers with Middlesbrough Council:** 71 foster carers, 26 connected carers.
- **Number of children in our care:** 514
- **Percentage of children in our care attending school (since the start of the school year):** all children 86.3%, primary-aged children 95%, secondary-aged children 77.6%, post-16 17.6%

1. HIGHLIGHTS

1.1 Early Help via the Stronger Families Service

- 1.1.1 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.
- 1.1.2 All children coming into early help are allocated and access support in a timely manner. The service does not have any waiting lists as a result.
- 1.1.3 In November 100 children opened to the early help service and 96 closed. Of those children closed, 100% had achieved a positive outcome.
- 1.1.4 Most of our early help cases (68%) 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 November 1205 children were receiving early help support from a variety of partners including health partners, schools, The Junction, Seen Heard Believed, Recovery Solutions, Middlesbrough Football Club and housing partners.
- 1.1.5 A deep dive of children who have re-referred into the service within 12 months highlighted that in November 2025 the majority of the re-referrals into early help were referred by the police. Police referrals comprised 25% of all re-referrals (8 contacts), step down from children's social care comprised of 21.8% of all re-referrals(7). Education made up 6.25 % (2) of the re-referral contacts. Other sources

included health 9.3%, (3), anonymous 9.3%, (3 contacts), Seen Heard Believed made up 9.3%, (3) and self-referrals made up 18.7%, (6). The 32 children that referred into early help were from 17 families.

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

- 1.2.1 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.
- 1.2.2 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. This enables relationships to be built quickly and momentum in the planning process to continue, increasing the likelihood of meaningful engagement.
- 1.2.3 There are delayed timescales in some areas. A process is in place to provide assurance that any delays do not compromise children and their safety, or progression of plans, whilst we strive to improve our approach to reviews. This is in line with our Promoting Purposeful Practice session held in October, where we concentrated on the quality and purpose of review points for children.
- 1.2.4 There are ongoing recruitment pressures in the service, with a heavy reliance on agency staff. The service is working to ensure that we increase numbers of permanent staff in order to ensure that consistency of practice improves, and children's support remains with the same worker. Our workforce strategy is being updated further to address the challenges faced in this area.
- 1.2.5 A review is underway within our Children's with Disabilities services to look at the quality of short breaks for children and families. Further work is taking place to explore how we can increase our capacity and reach more families.

1.3 Cared for Children and Care Leavers

- 1.3.1 National Care Leavers' month in November provided opportunities for young people to access additional activities, and for the council to celebrate our young people. Highlights included a music project where seven young people showcased their film *Dreams* at Roxy Movies, earning recognition and an award.
- 1.3.2 Care-experienced young people attended the last council meeting in November and engaged with councillors. Our Voice and Change ambassador asked a question of the mayor, asking how corporate parents can better understand their experiences. I'd like to thank all elected members who met the young people, watched their powerful video and posed for photos.





- 1.3.3 Within Middlesbrough there are currently 511 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.
- 1.3.4 There are 253 care leavers who are being supported by personal advisors (PAs) in our Pathways Team. Demand in the service has continued to increase and the team has been expanded accordingly. There are currently 43 young people who will turn 18 within the next 8 months. This number will increase if other young people become eligible to access the leaving care service during this period.
- 1.3.5 Our care leavers hub provides drop-in services every week. Young people speak positively about the opportunity that the hub provides them with, and the value of having a consistent location to attend.
- 1.3.6 I was thrilled to hear Health Secretary Wes Streeting MP announce that tens of thousands of care leavers will receive free prescriptions, dental and eyecare services up to age 25. He also announced an NHS guaranteed interview scheme and paid internships to break down barriers to opportunity. This is a concrete step towards the government's goal of giving children the best start in life.

1.4 Residential and Supported Accommodation

- 1.4.1 On 4 and 5 November Ofsted carried out an inspection of Rosecroft Children's Home under the social care common inspection framework. They found the provision to be outstanding in all areas. Inspectors praised the team for the way that they support all aspect of children's lives, from transition into a residential setting, to supporting with their education progress and enabling them to make friends and build positive relationships with others.
- 1.4.2 Some highlights from inspectors' feedback included:
- Holistic approach involves the children and those closest to them and allows a positive experience and successful start to life in their new home.
 - Children have positive relationships with staff, whom they trust. Children say they can talk about things that are personal, and they feel listened to by staff

who care. Children talk about staff as parental figures who bring laughter into their home.

- Children inform staff and their peers about how they are feeling and the decisions they have made about the food they want and the activities they would like to experience. Children are asked for their input into the decoration of the home and personalisation of their bedrooms.
- Children are making exceptional progress in education. Children receive support to maintain their education placements or find new providers that better meet their needs.

The full inspection report is published on the [Ofsted website](#). I'd like to congratulate staff and thank them for their hard work and dedication to the young people of Middlesbrough.

- 1.4.3 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.

1.5 Learning, Review and Development

- 1.5.1 The quality assurance (QA) team continues to deliver training informed by audit findings, alongside audit activities and the implementation of our QA Framework. The team has recently completed a series of thematic audits in collaboration with our local safeguarding children's partnership, focused on neglect. The outputs of the audits will inform benchmarking to support future developments.
- 1.5.2 The Social Work Academy continues to support our NQSWs as they take on increasingly complex work, developing their skills and confidence. In January they will explore potential career paths by learning about our different services and areas of expertise, including: children with disabilities, cared for children, pre-birth work.
- 1.5.3 Our two Frontline units continue to develop their knowledge and confidence. They are beginning to take on more varied opportunities as they progress towards becoming qualified social workers.

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 will work with colleagues to understand the findings of the focused visit into our MACH and Assessment Services and how that shapes our improvement journey going forward.
- 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.