

CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY PANEL

A meeting of the Children's Scrutiny Panel was held on 8 December 2025.

PRESENT: Councillor Lynch (Chair), Councillor Jackson (Vice Chair); Councillors: S Platt and Uddin.

OFFICERS: C Cannon, J Dixon and G Watson.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE were submitted on behalf of Councillors Nugent, Romaine and Tranter.

**** DECLARATIONS OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

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

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 27 OCTOBER 2025

The Minutes of the previous meeting of the Children's Scrutiny Panel held on 27 October 2025 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

SOUTH TEES SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN PARTNERSHIP (STSCP) – ANNUAL UPDATE

C Cannon, Interim Director of Education and Partnerships, and G Watson, South Tees Safeguarding Children Partnership Manager, were in attendance at the meeting to provide the Panel with an annual update in relation to the South Tees Safeguarding Children Partnership (STSCP).

A copy of the STSCP's Annual Report 2024-25 had been circulated to the Panel with the agenda in advance of the meeting and it was highlighted that this was presented to the Scrutiny Panel on an annual basis.

Members' attention was drawn, in particular, to the following areas within the report:-

- Who the STSCP were and what it did – A statutory multi-agency partnership with responsibility for safeguarding arrangements to protect vulnerable children. The STSCP was equally funded by its four partners – Middlesbrough Council, Redcar and Cleveland Council, Cleveland Police and North East, North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (NENC ICB). The STSCP supported and enabled local organisations and agencies to work together to ensure children were safeguarded and their welfare promoted and was committed to achieving the best possible outcomes for children and families.
- Governance Structure – The STSCP sat beneath the Lead Safeguarding Partners Group and STSCP Executive (comprising of delegated partners). As well as a Learning and Development Group and a Quality and Performance Group feeding into the STSCP Executive, there were four sub-groups – Tees Performance Management, Tees Training Group, Tees Harm outside the Home (HoTH) Group and Tees Procedures. Each group's role was outlined in the report. In addition, each of the groups within the structure linked to relevant strategic partnerships across the South Tees.

- Key Statistics/Data – In relation to Middlesbrough, at the time the annual report was produced (March 2025), there were 370 children on a Child Protection Plan. This was a 17% increase from the previous year. There were 506 children who were looked after – this was a 4% decrease from the previous year. There were more than 1,000 contacts for support each month, with 1,970 contacts recorded in March 2025 – a 22% increase from 2024.
- Building on Good Practice – A “Neglect Strategy” was developed and launched for Practitioners across South Tees. In addition, the Tees Harm outside the Home (HoTH) Strategy was developed and launched, bringing it in line with the latest agendas such as criminal exploitation and contextual safeguarding of harm outside the home. The HoTH operating procedure was agreed and implemented across the whole of Tees from April 2025. The STSCP had also increased learning opportunities available to staff and partners, for example, by hosting on-line virtual events and briefings.
- Practice Reviews and Guidance – The professional challenge and escalation guidance had been revised and updated in response to learning from Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews. Practice Reviews and Guidance had been updated and were available on the Tees Procedures website.
- Challenges:-
 - Ofsted had challenged both Middlesbrough and Redcar and Cleveland Councils on the implementation of their shared threshold document (ILACS 2019). In response, the STSCP reviewed the Threshold of Need “Providing the Right Support to Meet a Child’s Needs” Tees-wide and had adopted the Tees Threshold document in order to strengthen the improvement journey. Training on the use of the document was available to partners.
 - The absence of the permanent Safeguarding Nurse role in the ICB was a cause for concern, particularly with health colleagues who felt this post was key to the escalation of safeguarding concerns in the health trusts. There were further concerns regarding attendance by the permanent ICB representatives at the executive level meetings which was noted as a weakness to the partnership.
 - Diversity was a high level priority across the work of the Partnership. The Partnership continued to promote the use of interpreters to communicate with families whose first language was not English and it was recognised that the use of interpreters by front line staff was integral to effective communication with these families. The Partnership continued to monitor the recording of ethnicity as part of the audit program and that this, together with disabilities, was considered as part of assessments and the lived experience of the child/young person.

A discussion ensued and the following issues were raised:-

- Clarification was sought around the 22% increase in contacts for support and whether the increase was potentially due to training needs around safeguarding issues being addressed. The Panel was advised that the 22% increase referred to was for 2024 and that the figures for 2025 would be published in next year's annual report. In terms of the increase, it was considered that this was purely due to demand on services.
- A Member asked if an example could be provided of what constituted ‘harm outside the home’. In response, it was stated that the main issue was exploitation of teenagers, for example, being involved in delivering drugs, knife crime and sexual exploitation. The Harm outside the Home (HoTH) model had been implemented across the whole of the Tees to ensure a consistent approach was taken and some services had been restructured in an attempt to tackle some of the pressures.

- Reference was made to the ICB Safeguarding Nurse and it was queried what the purpose of this role was. It was explained that the STSCP required a Health representative and that, at the time of writing the annual report, there had been significant challenges around the lack of an ICB Safeguarding representative. Following some restructuring within the ICB, a permanent Safeguarding Nurse had been appointed which had resolved this issue and they attended all associated meetings to bring significant knowledge from a health perspective, having health oversight for looked after children and children subject to child protection. It was highlighted, however, that the ICB was commencing a further restructure and it was unknown at this stage what the outcome would be.
- Reference was made to the role of Designated Safeguarding Leads in schools and it was queried whether all Primary and Secondary Schools had one. It was stated that there should be a Designated Safeguarding Lead in every school and that there was a Designated Safeguarding Network to bring all Lead Officers together for training and discussion.
- A Panel Member raised a query in relation to whether staffing levels were adequate, particularly Social Workers, and around the use of agency staff. The Panel was informed that the Council had worked hard to recruit and retain staff as changes in staffing could have a detrimental impact on children and young people in terms of consistency. There tended to be a high turnover of staff and there had been some restructuring of Services to create the Harm Outside the Home Team. There was a continual drive to ensure permanent staff were retained and opportunities to make agency staff permanent, where appropriate, was always explored and promoted, however, recruitment and retention was a nationwide issue within the sector.
- It was acknowledged that volume of demand was a significant challenge and in response to a query it was explained that the increased demand for services was nationwide and not confined to Middlesbrough, however, Middlesbrough did have a unique population make up in that it was a small geographical area with a very diverse, changing community. Demand had grown and the challenge was for the services to meet demand.
- In response to a question around the impact of poverty on neglect, it was stated that it could play a significant role and that 39% of children in Middlesbrough were deemed to be living in poverty. There was currently a big focus on the poverty strategy which Public Health was leading on. The Chair highlighted that OSB had recently received a presentation on the Poverty Strategy and that it might be useful for the Panel to receive further information regarding this, from a Children's Services perspective, in the future.

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

AGREED that the information provided in relation to the South Tees Safeguarding Children Partnership's Annual Report be noted.

POSSIBLE TERMS OF REFERENCE – DISCUSSION ITEM

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

Proposed Draft Terms of Reference had been circulated with the meeting agenda for the Panel's consideration.

Following discussion, Members agreed that the review of out of area specialist provision should focus on SEND out of area specialist provision in an education context and, in a social care context, out of area provision for children known to social care with complex needs. It was agreed that the Democratic Services Officer would amend the wording of the Draft Terms of Reference to reflect this and to circulate to Panel Members.

The Panel identified some potential key lines of enquiry as follows:-

- What are the gaps in specialist provision locally?

- What are we currently doing to reduce those gaps?
- Forward planning to meet identified areas of increasing demand in areas of specialist provision.
- Ensuring children/young people have their needs met and supported and that provision was sustainable.
- Cost analysis of out of area specialist provision versus expanding local provision.

AGREED that the Terms of Reference for the Panel's review of 'Out of Area Specialist Provision' be agreed as follows:-

1. To examine the current position in Middlesbrough regarding the use of Out of Area Specialist Provision, including how and why out of area placements are made :
 - a) In a SEND educational context.
 - b) In a complex needs, social care context.
2. To examine how Middlesbrough's use of Out of Area specialist provision compares locally and nationally.
3. To consider current workforce development strategies and assess their impact on Out of Area specialist provision in both education and social care settings.
4. To consider best practice and procedures regarding Out of Area specialist provision for both education and social care elements.

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD UPDATE

The Chair provided a verbal update in relation to the business conducted at the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting held on 19 November 2025, namely:

- Scrutiny Chairs' updates.
- OSB Review into Poverty – Overview.
- Executive Member for Finance - Provided a presentation on Quarter One budget outturn.
- Executive Forward Plan.
- Progress on Forward Plan actions
- Next meeting of OSB – Thursday, 18 December at 4.30pm.

NOTED

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

There were no urgent items.

DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Children's Scrutiny Panel was scheduled for Monday, 26 January 2026 at 4.30pm.