

Middlesbrough Council
Children’s Scrutiny Panel

Report title	Ofsted Focused Visit to the Front Door, December 2025
Date of Meeting	9 March 2026
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Corporate Director	Annabel Bates, Corporate Director of Children’s Services
Wards Affected	All
Appendices (if any)	n/a

1. Executive Summary

1.1 This report provides an update on the Ofsted Focused Visit to the Front Door in December 2025, including:

- An overview of inspection activity and the purpose of the visit.
- A summary of findings of inspectors.
- Key actions and next steps in light of findings.

2. Overview of Focused Visit activity

2.1 Ofsted carried out a focused visit of our Front Door in children’s social care from 2nd to 10th December. The focused visit is a non-graded inspection, carried out as per the criteria outlined in the Ofsted Inspection of Local Authority Children’s Services (ILACS) framework. It is an important step towards our full ILACS inspection, which will take place in the first half of 2026.

2.2 Over the course of the process inspectors met with leaders, reviewed our documentation, sampled and audited multiple cases and met with numerous social workers within the team. They spent a significant amount of time meeting with the Corporate Director and the Head of Service in the Front Door in order to take a view on our understanding of the current quality of our service delivery, and any areas for improvement. In Middlesbrough Children’s Services the Front Door is split into two services – the Assessment Service and the Multi Agency Children’s Hub (MACH).

2.3 The process was thorough – with inspectors reviewing a much greater volume of cases than is standard in a Focused Visit. The depth of review of the service provided us with an opportunity to triangulate our own self-evaluation of the quality of services and verify whether our improvement priorities were fit for purpose.

2.4 The inspectors thanked our team for the warm welcome that they received while in Middlesbrough House. They praised those involved throughout for the calm, professional and organised approach to the inspection. Inspectors particularly wanted to thank staff who met with them. They described those involved as open, engaged in discussions and able to provide inspectors with a good understanding of what it's like to work in Middlesbrough. Inspectors identified a number of areas for improvement (as summarised in section 3) – all of which we had already raised with them as not yet good enough for our children. Inspectors made positive comments in relation to evaluation of current quality shared during the inspection and decisions being taken in relation to strategic leadership and improvement.

3. Summary of findings

3.1 Inspectors found a number of key themes during the inspection:

- Inconsistency in initial responses to children, leading to inconsistent outcomes.
- Inconsistency in application of thresholds.
- Some cases of reactive decision making and repeated statutory interventions when other forms of support would be more appropriate.
- Clear and accurate self-evaluation of needs of the service by the DCS.
- The quality and impact of audit practice is not leading to improvements in practice.
- Workers in the service described an improvement in support, supervision and management oversight in the last 3 months.
- Strategic leadership and a recognition of the need for improvement.

3.2 Specific elements practice were highlighted as areas for specific focus:

- The consistency of parental engagement in the MACH.
- The analysis of information and how it contributes to proportionate decisions in the MACH and strategy meetings.
- The quality and impact of safety planning during child protection enquiries.
- The response to children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless.

3.3 The full published feedback from the focused visit can be accessed on the Ofsted website: [50294203](#)

4. Key actions and next steps

4.1 The feedback from the focused visit clearly outlined some areas of our services which need to be improved at pace. The teams in the service have responded productively to the feedback and have been working together to incorporate key changes and embed more consistent practice against each of the areas for improvement highlighted above.

4.2 A number of areas outlined in 3.1 are areas which we are looking to improve across a number of areas, not just in the Front Door. In light of the focused visit, and further reviews of our practice in other service areas, we have been pulling together a comprehensive improvement plan. Our priorities are grouped into 10 priority areas:

1. Leadership

2. Participation
3. Front Door
4. Care Leavers Service
5. Safeguarding
6. Children with disabilities
7. Youth safety
8. Access to education
9. Residential services
10. Quality assurance and practice

4.3 It is important to note that the improvement plan does not capture the full work of all parts of children's services. Rather it focuses on the key areas of our work where improvement support has been put in place in order to improve outcomes for children. The plan and associated tracking documents will form an important contribution to our evidence for Ofsted when they return to carry out our full ILACS inspection.

4.4 The improvement plan will be presented to a recently constituted Improvement Board on 18th March and reviewed every six weeks. The improvement board is attended by the DCS, CEX, Lead Member for Children's Services and the DfE Improvement Advisor. It is chaired by Caroline O'Neill, LGA Children's Services Improvement Advisor for the North East.

4.5 All staff teams are involved in development of team-level plans and priorities, in order to continue to improve our services collectively.