

EXECUTIVE MEMBER UPDATE TO COUNCIL

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

DATE OF MEETING: 1st April 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:** 610 open episodes and 1280 episodes open to partners (as of 10 March.)
- **Number of foster carers with Middlesbrough Council:** 78 foster carers, 20 connected carers.
- **Number of children in our care:** 514
- **Children in our care attending school (since the start of the school year):**
Of 339 school-age children in our care:
 - 6 children do not have a school place, with 2 receiving education in a non-school setting (referred to as EOTAS.)
 - The percentage of children actively attending their education placement is 97.6%.

1. HIGHLIGHTS

1.1 General

- 1.1.1 I recently attended the first meeting of our re-established Improvement Board. The board is chaired by our advisor from the Local Government Association and its membership includes our DfE improvement advisor, the Chief Executive, our Corporate Director for Children's Services and other colleagues, in addition to myself. The board will look at practice improvement across all teams and I am grateful for the support our external advisors provide.
- 1.1.2 I attended a celebration breakfast for staff who had been nominated by colleagues for going the extra mile and showing real commitment to our young people. The event was inspirational and reminded me of the dedication and passion our staff show, often in challenging circumstances. The breakfast was an opportunity to discuss what staff feel we need to support improvement.
- 1.1.3 Alongside colleagues, I took part in the appointment process for two new service directors – one focusing on safeguarding and the other on quality assurance and practice. These two roles are vital for building capacity in the department but also addressing some of the key parts of our improvement aims – particularly around

consistency of practice. I'd like to thank Cllr Jackson for his work in chairing the panel and wish our new starters the very best of wishes in their new roles.

1.2 Early Help

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 The table below demonstrates that the number of children in Middlesbrough accessing early help has increased month on month from December 2025 to February 2026.

Early Help Service data	Dec 25	Jan 26	Feb 26
No. of EH - Internal	546	572	589
No. of EH - External	1108	1131	1286

1.2.3 The average caseload for Early Help practitioners is currently 19-20 children. Our case supervision completion rate in Early Help currently sits at 100%. All team managers have completed supervision training, to ensure supervision within Early Help is reflective and meets practice standards. Personal supervisions are at 100%, ensuring that staff are supported with their workloads and wellbeing.

1.2.4 Most of our early help cases (69%) 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. Early Help Coordinators are situated in the MACH and attend daily triage, this helps us to identify children, young people and families who would benefit from Early Help services.

1.2.5 Internal cases have increased by 17 compared to last month. External cases have increased by 155 compared to last month. The increase in external cases is a result of an increase in the range of different partners taking on the lead practitioner role. Examples include: The Junction 3, Short breaks 208, School 201, Health 278, School Readiness 151, MFC 36, Education, Employment & Training 33, Recovery Solution26, Daisy Chain 1, Drug Services 1, Youth Justice 1 & Education Plus 1.

1.2.6 Team scorecards tell us My Family Plans completed within timescale is 95%, this shows that all family needs are being assessed in a timely way.

1.2.7 The Family Plan Reviews completed within timescale was 84% and these reviews are multi agency so that Early Help partners can contribute to the plan. This has slightly decreased from 86% in January.

1.3 Front Door: MACH and Assessment Services

1.3.1 The Multi agency Safeguarding Hub (MACH) is the single front door, comprised of a multi-agency partnership that screens all safeguarding contacts received by the authority, to consider the most appropriate and proportionate response and support for our children and families. The Tees Framework of Need identifies children in need of support, with referrals to the Assessment service.

- 1.3.2 The duty assessment service complete timely child and family assessment and intervention to ensure that effective safeguarding is completed and the child's voice informs planning and intervention.
- 1.3.3 The number of children being referred has remained high throughout the year. The assessments inform the planning and threshold of intervention, with ongoing support with Child Protection plans, Child in Need and Care proceedings concluding with Children becoming Looked after.
- 1.3.4 The service is stable with agency staff joining the Assessment service to provide a fully permanent staff cohort. The MACH and Assessment teams are now fully staffed, with some agency staff for the additional capacity required to support the service on its improvement journey.
- 1.3.5 Members will recall the briefing note compiled by Corporate Director of Children's Services and I regarding the recent Ofsted focused visit of the MACH. Ofsted found that our DCS understands the challenges the service faces and they were positive about the improvement plans she has put in place. Ofsted found that the quality of initial responses to children was "inconsistent and didn't always lead to proportionate decisions for children and families". No children were seen to be at risk of immediate harm, but Ofsted said the threshold for when further intervention was needed was not consistently applied. Ofsted said leaders in the organisation demonstrated "a unified, collective ambition to ensure that children in Middlesbrough benefit from safe, high-quality services".
- 1.3.6 We are determined that the necessary changes have the required impact as soon as possible. I'd like to thank all staff in children's services for the commitment they show each day and the professional manner in which they approached the Ofsted visit. Together, we are determined to provide the best services possible to children and young people around Middlesbrough.
- 1.3.7 Following the visit, service development plans have been updated. A joint service meeting at the start of the year for the MACH and Assessment service launched these with positive engagement from the team.
- 1.3.8 The Ofsted findings make it clear that as an organisation we're aware of our strengths and also the challenges we face. We continue to work on ways to improve and build on the good work already being done, while addressing those areas which have been highlighted in the report.

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 who experience care proceedings. Children move on from the service when permanence is determined, either within their home, family or through care and/or adoption. In addition we have a tailored response to children who are vulnerable to exploitation, trafficking or falling into criminal activity, through our Aspire Service, Risk and Resilience, and Missing teams.

- 1.4.2 The number of children allocated to each social worker remains high. We have continued to prioritise allocation from assessment 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. It is recognised that improvements in assessment practice are beginning to reduce the number of children requiring allocation to a longer term social worker, this will take some time to have a marked impact on the number of children in our service.
- 1.4.3 There are some delayed timescales in some areas. A process is in place to ensure that any delays do not compromise children and their safety or progression of plans, whilst we strive to improve our approach to reviews. Practitioners are clear that the time spent with children, understanding their lived experiences cannot be compromised and visiting remains a priority.
- 1.4.4 A review is underway within our Children 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, including collaboration with our Parent Carer Forum to provide more opportunities for parents and families to contribute to our improvement priorities.
- 1.4.5 There will be further reviews of the service this Spring, both internally and externally. This will support us in understanding the impact we are having on children and young people, our strengths and areas of development, in addition to preparing us for external inspection.

1.5 Cared for Children and Care Leavers

- 1.5.1 Within Middlesbrough there are currently 514 children who are cared for across our teams. Reunification continues with children progressing to Court change Orders. The panel which reviews children's permanence planning actively looks at reunification or lesser Orders when the time is right for the child. Plans for all cared for children are reviewed at the monthly Permanency Monitoring panel.
- 1.5.2 There are 249 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 so although the number of allocated care leavers has dipped slightly we know that this will increase again soon. 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. In addition to the allocated cases each PA is also co-allocated to 5 or 6 16-17 year olds.
- 1.5.3 Our care leavers hub provides drop-in services every week. Young people speak positively about the opportunities that the hub provides them, and the value of having a consistent location to attend.
- 1.5.4 In February our care leavers service took part in a peer visit supported by colleagues within the region. The visit took place over 3 days and reviewed the work of the service in supporting our care leavers. During the visit our visitors spent time talking to leaders in the service, met with a group of young people, met with groups of PAs and looked at a large volume of files of young people. Visitors found relationships between PAs and young people to be positive and spoke of the strong commitment

of PAs to supporting young people. Areas for improvement included: oversight and leadership of data, consistency of practice in record keeping, practice approach for 16-17 year olds, quality of audit. The service has developed an action plan which has been incorporated into the broader Children's Services improvement plan.

1.6 Residential and Supported Accommodation

1.6.1 On 6 and 7 January Ofsted carried out an inspection of Willowtree Children's Home under the social care common inspection framework. They found the provision to be good in all areas. Inspectors praised the team for the way that they support children in the home. This outcome means that all children's home inspections for Middlesbrough in the past year have been good or outstanding. This is very welcome news – I would like to congratulate all staff involved. This provides an excellent basis for our new head of service and staff to look at the future of residential and supported accommodation and how we can maximise its impact for young people.

1.6.2 Some highlights from inspectors' feedback included:

- Managers work well with parents, ensuring children are supported with their health needs. All immunisations are up to date, and children receive appropriate support for emotional wellbeing and mental health.
- Formal education is actively encouraged. Managers work closely with the Virtual School, hold regular meetings, and collaborate effectively to maintain education plans.
- The home has clear day and night routines in place, and children are involved in planning these routines. Children reported feeling settled and stated they enjoy living in the home.
- Manager and psychologists regularly review and strengthen individual support plans. These plans are reflective, updated frequently, and include input from professionals. Children are supported to reflect, have a voice, and are included in planning.
- Plans are well-written, clear, and provide strong guidance for staff practice. Hard copies are available in the home to support new staff in understanding children's needs.
- Kind and supportive language is used to re-engage children following incidents.

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 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 on improvements to our You Matter to Us: Corporate Parenting Board, ensuring our young people's voices are heard and they have input in shaping the support we give them.
- 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.