

CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY PANEL

A meeting of the Children's Scrutiny Panel was held on Monday 9 March 2026.

PRESENT: Councillors E Clynch (Chair), D Jackson (Vice-Chair), M Nugent and S Platt

PRESENT BY INVITATION: Councillors

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

OFFICERS: K Allan, J Dixon, A Bates and C Cannon

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: Councillors A Romaine and S Tranter

25/44 **WELCOME AND FIRE EVACUATION PROCEDURE**

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

25/45 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

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

25/46 **MINUTES - CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY PANEL - 26 JANUARY 2026**

The Minutes of the previous meeting of the Children's Scrutiny Panel held on 26 January 2026 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

25/47 **UPDATE - OFSTED FOCUSED VISIT TO THE FRONT DOOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

The Chair welcomed the Corporate Director of Children's Services, A Bates, to the meeting to provide an update on the Ofsted Focused Visit to the Front Door, which took place between 2–10 December 2025.

The visit had been a nongraded inspection under the ILACS framework and formed part of preparation for the full ILACS inspection expected in the first half of 2026. Inspectors met with senior leaders, reviewed documentation and audited a substantial number of cases across the Assessment Service and the Multi Agency Children's Hub (MACH). It was noted that Ofsted had been in the process of revising the ILACS framework, with changes due to take effect from 1 April 2026. The Director advised that the implications of these changes were not yet known and confirmed that clarification had been sought from Ofsted, given that current processes were based on the existing framework.

Inspectors thanked staff for their professional and organised approach and noted improvements in management oversight and support over the previous three months. They also confirmed alignment between the Council's own self-evaluation and the issues identified during inspection.

Key findings included inconsistency in initial responses to children, variable application of thresholds, and reactive decision-making in some cases. Concerns were also raised regarding the quality and impact of audits, parental engagement in the MACH, analysis informing decision-making, safety planning, and the response to 16 and 17-year-olds presenting as homeless.

The service was already acting on the feedback, and areas for improvement were being incorporated into a wider Children's Services Improvement Plan, organised under ten priority themes, including leadership, safeguarding, care leavers, youth safety, and quality assurance.

The plan would be considered at the newly established Improvement Board on 18 March 2026, with six-weekly reviews thereafter. All staff teams would contribute to team-level plans to support consistent and sustained improvement.

A discussion ensued and the following queries were raised:-

- A Member asked the Director how she felt following the inspection. The Director advised that the process had been a helpful and constructive experience, providing clarification on whether the service held the right information and had highlighted a small number of gaps that had already been anticipated. She stated that it was reassuring that inspectors agreed with the service's planned improvement activity. The Director noted that there were several significant areas of focus, including audit and quality assurance, particularly the need to update and clarify roles and responsibilities to ensure greater consistency across teams. She also emphasised the importance of using learning from children's files to drive service improvement.
- A Member asked whether the need to increase and improve audits was primarily due to limited staff capacity or resources. The Director advised that the issue was broader, highlighting a lack of clarity regarding what constituted a good audit within a well-functioning team. She confirmed that the SEND team had been asked to assist with audits following positive feedback during their recent inspection and noted that while good audit practice existed, it had not been applied consistently across the service. She explained that the first step would be to identify strong examples of audit work, using them to improve overall quality and, where appropriate, reduce the number of audits undertaken. In response to a further question regarding whether Artificial Intelligence (AI) would play a role in this work, the Director stated that AI had the potential to add value by streamlining processes and administrative tasks. Several tools were being considered for trial to determine how AI could best support audit improvements.
- A Member asked, in relation to the forthcoming audit and the anticipated changes to the ILACS framework, what measures would be put in place to mitigate the impact of the 'goalposts' moving. The Director advised that, following discussions with Ofsted, the changes were expected to relate primarily to the language and phrasing of judgements rather than to the substance of what constituted good practice. It was explained that the service would need to adapt the terminology used in its documentation and presentations, but the underlying expectations of practice would remain consistent. The Director confirmed that this would not alter how services were delivered but would affect how improvement plans were presented, and that Ofsted had agreed to meet with the service to cross-reference the presentation of information against the new framework.
- A Member queried how the service was performing in relation to staff retention and whether difficulties remained. The Director reported that progress had been made in securing more permanent staff at the Front Door, noting that colleagues had found it a positive environment in which to work. It was mentioned that some challenges persisted in specific areas, particularly within safeguarding and social work roles, where recruitment continued to be difficult. The Director confirmed that newly qualified social workers were being successfully appointed to permanent posts and that the majority wished to remain with the service, which supported efforts to reduce reliance on agency staff. It was noted that although agency usage remained high, each Head of Service had targets to convert agency workers into permanent staff. A workforce strategy was already in place; however, the service now needed to develop a more detailed workforce action plan. The Director further highlighted that workforce pressures were a national and regional issue, particularly across the North East.
- A Member questioned the feedback regarding inconsistency in responses to children and the application of thresholds. The Director advised that inspectors had found no children were left at risk, but social workers had taken differing approaches when completing required actions. Some had fully captured the family's voice and the child's voice, while others had focused on information from schools or had not gathered sufficient information, resulting in inconsistencies in decision-making. Similar inconsistencies had been identified in the application of thresholds, particularly when deciding whether cases should be escalated. The Director reported that inspectors had noted improved management oversight, which was expected to support greater consistency. She added that the inspection team had provided examples of best practice, which would be used as a learning opportunity for staff.

- In response to a further query from a Member regarding whether there was a clear pathway or criteria to follow, the Director confirmed that such criteria were in place. She explained that issues arose when inconsistent responses meant that social workers did not always obtain all necessary information, resulting in gaps in practice rather than incorrect application of the process.
- Members questioned whether any prior warning would be given regarding further changes to the ILACS framework. The Director advised that Ofsted would be removing the singular overall judgement and would instead assess different aspects of the service separately, meaning there would no longer be a single overarching rating. It was noted that, under the previous framework, an 'adequate' judgement could trigger DfE intervention, and the implications of the new model would require further consideration to ensure the service was positioned strongly within the higher categories. In response to queries about the categories and language that would be used, the Director confirmed that this had not yet been clarified by Ofsted, although it was expected that the care leavers and leadership judgements would remain due to their level of risk, with other judgement areas still open to debate. The Director further advised that Ofsted intended to retain the existing terminology (such as 'outstanding') and were considering adopting elements of the schools-based model in their approach.
- A Member asked whether, under the revised framework, the service could focus on improving weaker areas while maintaining stronger ones. The Director confirmed that this was the intention behind the changes and that the service would welcome such an approach, as it recognised that strengths varied across different areas. Members noted that this model was similar to that used in schools and would allow the Council to prioritise improvement activity without stronger areas being adversely affected. It was suggested that this would prevent one weaker aspect from lowering the overall judgement and would support a more proportionate focus on areas requiring development. The Director added that one of the key drivers for separating judgements had been the tragic death of Head Teacher, Ruth Perry, highlighting the need to ensure that difficult judgements did not fall disproportionately on a single individual. The Director advised that it would take several inspection cycles to understand how the new approach would operate in practice.

AGREED that the information provided be noted.

25/48

UPDATE ON PREVIOUS REVIEW - CHILDREN MISSING EDUCATION (CME)

The Head of SEN and Vulnerable Learners was in attendance to provide the service's responses to the Scrutiny Panel's previous recommendations in relation to Children Missing Education (CME).

In respect of Recommendation A, which asked that CME be embedded within Middlesbrough Council's Draft Poverty Strategy and referenced within any associated performance framework, it was reported that the Local Authority, and Public Health in particular, were no longer planning to produce a standalone Poverty Strategy. It was confirmed that Education and Partnerships had agreed with Public Health that any future strategic work aimed at reducing poverty would incorporate CME where relevant, ensuring that its impact continued to be recognised within wider anti-poverty activity.

In relation to Recommendation B, which sought assurance that Education and Partnerships were fully prepared for the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, particularly the monitoring of Elective Home Education (EHE) and the implementation of a single unique identifier for children, the service confirmed that it already maintained a compulsory register of children not in school and had robust procedures in place to oversee electively home educated children. It was further noted that the Bill would remove the automatic right for parents to home educate where a child was subject to a child protection investigation or plan, a change that the service welcomed as it strengthened safeguards for vulnerable children. The service also advised that the Bill would empower local authorities to require school attendance where the home education offer or home environment was deemed unsuitable. It was reported that Middlesbrough already exercised its existing legal powers to return children to school where necessary, and any strengthening of these powers, including the potential ability to inspect the home learning environment, was welcomed.

In respect of Recommendations C and D, it was noted that both required the establishment of Working Groups involving Primary Schools in Central Middlesbrough, Education and Partnerships, Stronger Communities and local Councillors. These Working Groups were intended to explore support for schools experiencing high levels of pupil transience and roll turnover, consult with stakeholders to understand the nature of their concerns, and produce action plans to address identified issues, including the higher rate of CME within the Romanian community. Both groups were also required to report progress to the Children's Scrutiny Panel by March 2026. It was reported at the meeting that, as the membership for both groups would have been identical, it had been agreed to establish a single combined Working Group. The Group had already met, with a further meeting scheduled for 11 March, and had begun examining several areas of concern, including deep dive activity to inform practical actions relating to extended holidays, fixed penalty notices, CME over a 12month period and refusals of school places. Members were advised that further information would be provided to the Panel as the work progressed.

In respect of Recommendation E, it was noted that an update was to be provided to the Children's Scrutiny Panel offering assurance on the ongoing work to support children at risk of permanent exclusion, with a report due no later than October 2026. Similarly, in relation to Recommendation F, an update was to be presented to the Panel on the new Alternative Provision and the restructure of the Inclusion and Outreach model, with a report required by April 2026. Deadlines for both reports were not until April and October 2026, respectively.

During discussion, Members noted that the national position regarding the relevant legislative changes remained fluid. It was reported that a final reading of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill was expected to take place in the House of Lords around April, although a number of wider governmental processes were still underway which might affect the timeline. Officers advised that, while the outcome had not yet been confirmed, preparatory work was being undertaken in the background to ensure that swift decisions could be made once the position became clear. It was further confirmed that some elements of the required processes were already in place, and that many of the operational arrangements and team structures previously established had anticipated the requirements of the forthcoming Bill. Members also noted that, although the Bill had originally been expected earlier, there had been a delay in its progression.

AGREED that the information provided be noted and that further updates would be provided when available.

25/49

OUT OF AREA SPECIALIST PROVISION - FURTHER EVIDENCE

The Panel received a report which provided further evidence relating to the use of out-of-area specialist placements for children looked after. The report summarised comparative data for Middlesbrough against England totals, statistical neighbours, the North East region and the Tees Valley, using verified national data as at 31 March 2025.

It was noted that the percentage of children looked after who were placed more than 20 miles from home in Middlesbrough (15%) was broadly comparable with statistical neighbours (14%) and the Tees Valley average (13%), and that Middlesbrough's position had remained consistent over the previous four years. The report also highlighted that the proportion of children placed within Middlesbrough's local authority boundary remained lower than in comparator areas, and that there had been a small increase in cases where the distance from home had not been recorded.

A full dataset was provided, detailing the distribution of placements within and beyond 20 miles of home, and within and outside the local authority boundary, across four years of data for all comparator groups.

A discussion ensued and the following queries were raised:-

- Members queried why some placement records showed the distance from a child's home as "not known". The Director explained that this could occur where live data needed to be updated, where information had not been fully completed before being submitted to the DfE, or where details were difficult to capture for children who moved frequently. It was confirmed that these issues presented learning needs for both the service and its partners.

- Members also raised concerns about expenditure and questioned whether additional local accommodation could be developed. The Director advised that several complex factors influenced this, including changes in foster care over time and a current shortfall in provision for older children. It was reported that children's homes were generally well occupied and that opportunities for expansion were being explored, alongside work to strengthen emergency placement options and commissioning activity to support more children to be placed closer to home.
- In response to questions about the availability of children's homes, the Director confirmed that Middlesbrough operated seven homes, and that all had been rated as 'good', or better, following their most recent inspections in their first year.
- Members noted that Middlesbrough's proportion of placements within the local authority boundary appeared low, although the percentage of placements within 20 miles of home was broadly comparable with other areas. The Director advised that more detailed data might be available in future but could not be verified if not formally captured.
- Members queried whether financial factors formed part of the analysis, however, it was noted that placement costs were not directly comparable within the dataset provided. In relation to whether accommodation was shared with neighbouring authorities, the Director confirmed that there were no formal arrangements, although regional collaboration was increasing, despite national mandates not always aligning with local need.
- In terms of working more collaboratively with local and regional neighbours in relation to fostering and residential care, it was noted that some delays were due to national reforms, including the pilot for Regional Care Collaboratives, which the North East had not taken part in, and ongoing discussions about regional approaches to foster care, residential care, and secure provision.
- Members also commented that the findings and conclusions from this discussion would inform the final report and its potential recommendations.

AGREED that the information provided be noted.

25/50

CORPORATE DIRECTOR'S UPDATE

Members received a brief update on the Government's intentions for forthcoming SEND reforms.

The Director advised that the reforms were still being analysed and that a deeper discussion would be required once further clarity had been provided. It was reported that the Council would be required to submit a clear plan to the Government by the summer, setting out how Middlesbrough would work in partnership across the system to implement the changes.

The Director noted that Middlesbrough's most recent SEND Inspection had been very positive and confirmed that this area already had strong strategic relationships with schools, alongside an established SEND and Inclusion Strategy. She added that future reporting requirements were expected to be significantly different and that a more detailed update would be brought to the Panel once additional information was available.

AGREED that the information provided be noted and a further update on the SEND reforms would be provided when available.

25/51

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

There were no urgent items.

