

EXECUTIVE MEMBER UPDATE TO COUNCIL

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

DATE OF MEETING: 09 September 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:** 619 open episodes and 1281 episodes open to partners (as of 31st July 2026)
- **Number of foster carers with Middlesbrough Council:** 75 foster carers, 32 connected carers
- **Number of children in our care:** 557
- **Children in our care attending school (since the start of the school year):** 403
 - 11 children do not have a school place, with 4 receiving education in a non-school setting (referred to as EOTAS)
 - The percentage of children actively attending their education placement is 82%

1. HIGHLIGHTS

ILACS inspection

1.1 Overview and oversight

- 1.1.1 I have focussed on the recent outcome of our ILACS inspection in this report. We received our full ILACS inspection between 8 and 19 June. The inspection looked at all aspects of Children's Services. Prior to the inspection, the service had been working to an improvement plan, overseen by the Middlesbrough Children's Improvement Board, of which I am a member, and which is independently chaired by Caroline O'Neill from the Local Government Association. Following the findings of the ILACS inspection, we have reframed the improvement plan to focus on progress to date, evidence gathered during the inspection and longer-term improvement plans within our services. We are also reframing improvement activity now that our full DMT is in post, and in response to a wide range of public sector reforms.
- 1.1.2 I met with one of the inspectors in a one-to-one session and attended the verbal feedback to understand the findings. The outcome, which highlighted that we require improvement to be good in the four key areas, was not a surprise to us. We knew prior to the inspection how much work we have to do and the inspection

reaffirmed to us that we understand where we need to focus on to get the results we want to see.

1.1.3 Inspectors recognised the scale of challenges faced within our services and the impact that changing senior leadership has had on our improvement trajectory. I am pleased that we have a stable and permanent DMT in Children's Services to drive forward the improvement we need to see. Inspectors commended the decision to proactively establish an externally chaired improvement board earlier this year. They expressed optimism about progress to date stating:

1.1.4 *"With a stable and experienced leadership team now in place, strategic planning and decision-making are improving, with clearer priorities and expectations beginning to drive more consistent practice. Throughout the inspection, inspectors agreed with our self-evaluation, with the areas of progress and areas for further improvement identified by DMT."*

1.2 Early Help and the Front Door

1.2.1 There were notable findings in relation to progress since the December 2025 Focused Visit, with evidence found by inspectors that progress had been made in a number of key areas. They were assured that the Front Door is now secure and found several examples of good practice within Early Help and the Front Door. While there are ongoing practice improvements still to be made, buy in from staff to progress to date was evident in their conversations with inspectors giving confidence that this positive trajectory will continue. Inspectors also found progress in relation to the quality of audit and recognised the direct impact of the work of our Sector-Led Improvement Partners on this in recent months.

1.3 Other strengths

1.3.1 Culture within teams is changing, with positive feedback in relation to our new workforce strategy and improvement priorities. This was evident across Early Help, the Front Door and our Virtual School. It was also the case where leaders had stepped in to provide support and improvement at short notice, for example with Children With Disabilities and Short Breaks teams. There was also considerable support from colleagues in the commissioning service and from our data lead and his team. Other strengths identified during the inspection included:

- LADO practice was noted as strong, with strong assurance in relation to line of sight
- Improvements were found in Private Fostering – "Visits and assessments are thorough and consider the views of the child."
- The quality of coordination of and preparation for the inspection was praised throughout by inspectors. Considerable support from leaders across children's services to help staff before meetings with inspectors and through the debriefing sessions afterwards
- High quality analysis and leadership by members of DMT and our acting Principal Social Worker in response to the 12 cases raised with us for formal response
- Recognition of the strength of leadership and experience of new Service Directors joining the team, and that Middlesbrough Children's Services is collaborating more effectively within the region - and starting to be seen as

somewhere strong and experienced leaders and practitioners would choose to work

1.4 Areas for improvement

- 1.4.1 **The extent to which leaders and the workforce are aspirational and ambitious for children in Middlesbrough** was highlighted as an area for improvement. They also highlighted the need to improve how we enable children, young people and their families to actively shape service improvements through participation, engagement and influence.
- 1.4.2 **What we are doing to address this:** This area of improvement reflects two areas of improvement from our improvement plan. Under 1a - Culture Change, we are focusing on strengthening relationships between teams and articulating a strong vision for the service. In 2a - Participation Strategy, we are recruiting to new roles and reviewing all our participation activities to make sure they are meaningful and allow young people and families to co-design services.
- 1.4.3 **The quality of written records for children, young people and families** was highlighted as needing improvement. This area reflects previously identified issues in relation to quality of practice and the impact of quality assurance on improving record keeping and management oversight. I have long highlighted the need for consistency and quality of practice to be improved and, while we have made real improvements recently, the inspectors rightly highlight this as an area for continued focus.
- 1.4.4 **What we are doing to address this:** We have captured the detail of this in priority 10 - Quality Assurance & Practice. We have a new Service Director, Quality Assurance & Practice in place, driving forward change. In our plan, we are focussing on clear perimeters for audit for staff and improving reporting. We will support staff to ensure that written records which reflect children's lives, experiences and needs. This is an area where we are seeing an impact - Ofsted noted that recent audits are child focused, comprehensive, well written and evidence based.
- 1.4.5 **The identification and quality of support to young carers** was raised as an area we need to improve. This became a key line of enquiry during the inspection due to variability of practice and a culture of low expectations.
- 1.4.6 **What we are doing to address this:** We accepted this finding and as a result, we have added this into our priorities for the improvement plan. We will appoint a case-holding practice lead to act as a champion for young carers, across children's services – and in particular children's social care. We will also develop an action plan to upskill staff in identification and support of young carers and incorporate young carers actions into work of the participation steering group.
- 1.4.7 **The quality and impact of management supervision** in progressing children's assessments and plans, including decision-making for children entering care.
- 1.4.8 **What we are doing to address this:** This area of improvement is captured across improvement priority 1 - leadership. We will ensure that all practitioners have routine,

high quality supervision which empowers them to progress support for children.

1.4.9 The exploration and engagement of family networks for children in need of help, care and protection. This was a key line of enquiry during the inspection, in particular during the evidence-gathering for our safeguarding and children in care services.

1.4.10 What we are doing to address this: We have captured this as an explicit focus within updated priorities. We will develop family network procedures and training for practitioners. We will embed family networking in practice expectations and provide support to managers.

1.4.11 The impact of challenge and escalation from independent reviewing officers, including the timeliness of children receiving permanence and life-story work.

1.4.12 What we are doing to address this: This area is captured as a new sub priority within improvement priority: Quality Assurance and Practice and 9d – IROs. The role of IROs is an important element of our improvement plan, and we will ensure quality of records and their challenge of poor practice both improve in order to ensure that their practice has the impact it should. We are refreshing the practice standards to ensure we can model best practice.

1.4.13 In our improvement plan, we are also focusing on measures to:

- Secure permanent positions for key practitioners who are supporting some of our most vulnerable children, e.g. Social Worker working with children in care with the most complex needs; Social Worker leading our work with Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC)
- Build on excellent practice in relation to supporting our global majority children in recognition of our diverse population
- Improve system-wide understanding of domestic abuse to improve practice and partnership working
- Creative, preventative practice in relation to younger siblings
- Improve practice in relation to acute family crisis and avoid mislabelling episodes as being linked to homelessness
- Review family time offer and resources to address social work capacity issues

2. THE TIME AHEAD

2.1 I will continue to work to support our foster carers and provide oversight through a period of transition as government reforms are implemented. I spent some time ringing our foster carers recently to thank them for all they do for our young people in Middlesbrough. We will hold a celebration event for foster carers in September and I am looking forward to fosterers being recognised for all they do.

2.2 I will continue to contribute to our Children's Services Improvement Board and work with the board to agree updated improvement plans in response to our recent Ofsted inspection.

- 2.3 I will build on improvements made in our Corporate Parenting Board, ensuring our young people's voices are heard and they have input in shaping the support we give them.
- 2.4 I will continue to provide challenge and oversight of budget and performance through regular meetings alongside the Executive Member for Finance.
- 2.5 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.