

**COUNCIL**  
**17 JULY 2025**

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**OVERVIEW OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE PORTFOLIO**

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1. Since the last meeting of Council, the following are all relevant to the main areas of work undertaken under the Children and Young People Portfolio.

**The Government's June Spending Review**

2. In the recent Government spending review £555M of additional national funding between 2025 and 2028 was announced. The Treasury said that the additional resource would enable investment in preventive provision that "avoids a family's needs escalating, reducing costs and demand" while also expanding support for care leavers and fixing "the broken care market" through measures in the Children's Well Being and Schools Bill. There was also a commitment announced to continue the £523M in national annual funding allocated this year for Children's Social Care reform. The comprises of £270M in Social Care prevention grant and £253M previously allocated in the now disbanded Supporting Families Programme.
3. This is hugely welcome, and will begin to reverse some of the previous Government's destructive policies, including the cuts to Sure Start. Here in Darlington, work will be undertaken to understand the implications and impact of these announcements locally and in line with the service development working already taking place to ensure that the new statutory responsibilities as part of the Children's Well Being and Schools Bill are complied with and met. This is also in line with this work this Council has undertaken since 2023 to develop greater sufficiency in children's placements, and improving services for our care leavers.
4. The national core schools budget will increase from £64.8 billion this year to £69.5 billion in 2028, a cash-terms increase of £4.7 billion by the end of the spending review period. Spending on school maintenance and repairs nationally will also rise by around £400 million to around £2.3 billion a year by 2029-30.
5. The Government has announced an extension of free school meals eligibility. From September 2026, all pupils who have at least one parent or carer receiving universal credit will be eligible, regardless of their total household income. This is a key milestone in the Government's agenda to tackle Child Poverty and ensure all children have the Best Start in Life.
6. It is estimated that there will be 150,000 fewer people in relative poverty after housing costs in FYE 2030 as a result of expanding Free School Meals in England to all children on Universal Credit, compared to baseline projections. This includes 100,000 fewer children in relative poverty after housing costs compared to the baseline.

## **Child Poverty**

7. Last month I attended a meeting of the North East Child Poverty Commission, where we received an important presentation from the lead member of the Cabinet Office on the Government's forthcoming new national child poverty strategy, due to be published in Autumn 2025. Along with the expansion of free school meals for all Universal Credit households mentioned above, the Government has also announced a new Crisis and Resilience Fund to replace the Household Support Fund, supporting families in immediate hardship.
8. This is in the context of child poverty in the UK significantly increasing since 2010, with 700,000 more children living in poverty, reaching 4.3 million in 2022/23. This means that 3 in 10 children in the UK are now in poverty. The poverty gap, or the difference between the average income of poor families and the poverty line, has widened, indicating that poor families have fallen further into poverty, and the number of children in deep poverty has also increased.
9. Darlington's review of data published by DWP in March of this year on children in low-income families shows that in 2023/24, 28% (5564) of 0–15-year-olds in Darlington were in relative poverty before housing costs compared with 28.4% in the North East. On this measure the Borough ranks 8th out of 12 in the North East, and 4th out of 5 in the Tees Valley. This data shows rising numbers of children in poverty across North East England and Darlington is no exception.
10. No single organisation can tackle poverty alone. Alongside the North East Child Poverty Commission, we are continuing with our review to understand the work currently undertaken across services that has a positive impact on those living in poverty. We will devise a broader approach to look at wider family and community poverty, which will be informed by the cross council commission of services we're undertaking over the summer. Once the national strategy in the autumn has been published, we will consider where we can best focus. We will consider the challenges around poverty and low income in the development of Darlington's Plan for Neighbourhoods and Inclusive Growth Strategy, and the Tees Valley Local Growth Plan.

## **Early Intervention and Front Door**

11. The Children's Initial Advice Team continues to be a stable and effective team. The focus of the team remains central to relationships and ensuring the right service support children and their families at the right time to gain the best possible outcomes at the earliest opportunity. The performance data, audit work, feedback and outcomes show that CIAT are ensuring the right service to our families, without delay. The conversion rate of contacts to referrals to social care has decreased over the past 12 months and this is testament to the work that has been carried out to make sure decision making is proportionate, families do not experience unnecessary social care assessment and that first and foremost children are safe and that the service provided meets the needs of children and families.
12. The Family Time Service remains a stable and effective service for our children and their families as they continue to focus on maintaining relationships between children and their families when children are cared for by the Local Authority. The team work closely with

social care teams and offer a wide range of support alongside facilitating and supervising family time sessions. More recently the team have supported with completing aspects of life story work, providing transport for young people and they are assisting with visits to families where there can be a focus on parenting work to inform assessment, and supporting family placement team with school transports. The team also continue to link closely with partners, for example, the Housing team and there have been instances when there are white goods, furniture and household items that might have ordinarily been disposed of now being recycled for use by our families in need.

### **Building Stronger Families Service**

13. Work continues to ensure that early help assessments are led by external partners, and there are a higher number of schools now leading which is very positive. The new early help assessment is proving positive, with relational family plans being more sustainable and achievable overall.
14. The service offer is town wide, and we are currently building up the offer based from The Rydal Academy following a move over from Skerne Park. The aim is to work closely with the schools in the area to ensure that the offer reflects the needs of the families. New universal groups offer more in-depth support for speech and language in early years and this will port around the town to ensure that everyone has access to this resource. Targeted groups continue to support parenting and behaviour management, as well as reducing parental conflict, and we are currently looking to develop a new group to support those experiencing domestic abuse.

### **Young People's Engagement and Justice Service (YPEJS)**

15. Summer Activities are due to be scheduled in coming weeks, the service will aim to have a day centred around mountain bike maintenance and riding skills, a fishing day, a mixed day for the continuation of the victim support Duke of Edinburgh group which will rotate between in-house delivered activities and a couple of paid and finally a generic activity day that will also follow a similar pattern, all referrals taken from current caseloads.
16. Out of Court Diversion Cases slightly on the higher side, but increase in workload more impacted by court work, bail, community orders and remand management programmes.
17. Prevention case levels remaining consistent with closures being replaced with new cases.
18. The team attended Adolescent Stalking training delivered by Forensic-CAMHS, contained a mixture of research reviews as well as lived experience input which was extremely well received by staff. Adolescent Stalking refers to stalking where the perpetrator is an adolescent, as opposed to an adult. Whilst we are not currently supporting any young people where this is an issue, it is an emerging trend nationally and so the training leaves the service well prepared as and when these issues emerge.

### **Safeguarding Assessment and Care Planning including Children with Disabilities**

19. The strategic and operational responsibilities for exploitation have now moved to the Care Planning part of the service following a review. Work is underway to review current procedures and processes to better support children, families and practitioners. There is

to be a focused practice session in July linked to Exploitation for Care Planning staff to improve confidence in this area of the service. Improved links have been made with Durham as our neighbouring authority but also Cleveland with a Teesside operational group to be set up to share information around cross-boundary exploitation. The service is focused on tackling issues of exploitation and practice in this area will be enhanced by being co-located alongside care planning services.

20. Average workloads within the Assessment and Safeguarding teams are 17 with the highest being 30. Some challenges in relation to sickness have impacted on workloads and support is being offered to reduce workloads where possible and support practitioners to progress closures where appropriate. Average workloads within the Children with Disabilities team are 15. A new role to improve the social care advice within EHCPs is progressing well and is based within the team. We are currently exploring the opportunity to commission some of another LA's time to support our assessments of children who have potential children's continuing health care needs.
21. Ongoing focused work is taking place on re-referrals to children's social care with a weekly meeting taking place. Current data for April 2025 shows re-referrals at 18.1% down from 23.1% in 2024/2025.

## **Looked After and Care Leaver information**

### **Children in our Care and Care Leavers**

22. Of the 13 taster flats currently available, five are occupied by young people over the age of 18. Those eligible to bid for housing are doing so with support from their Staying Close Personal Advisors. One 17-year-old has recently moved from Thompson Street into a taster flat and is thriving in independent living. Another 17-year-old young man is scheduled to move into a flat on 16th June. Two Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children are sharing a two-bedroom flat. One of them has recently moved on, and another young person has taken their place. Additionally, a 17-year-old young woman has chosen to return to Darlington from Wolverhampton to further develop her independent living skills. She moved on 5 June with support from her peer mentor. The remaining four flats are currently vacant and awaiting refurbishment and redecoration. These are expected to be ready for new occupants by mid-July.
23. Of the 13 taster flats currently available, five are occupied by young people over the age of 18. Those eligible to bid for housing are doing so with support from their Staying Close Personal Advisors. One 17-year-old has recently moved into a taster flat and is thriving in independent living. Another 17-year-old young man is scheduled to move into a flat on 16th June. Two Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children are sharing a two-bedroom flat. One of them has recently moved on, and another young person has taken their place. Additionally, a 17-year-old young woman has chosen to return to Darlington from Wolverhampton to further develop her independent living skills. She moved on 5 June with support from her peer mentor. The remaining four flats are currently vacant and awaiting refurbishment and redecoration. These are expected to be ready for new occupants by mid-July.
24. Data from 30 April evidenced we had 269 children in our care, with 22 Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking children. The reduction in children subject to a Care Order is a result of

focused work across all services to ensure the threshold for the Care Order is consistently reviewed. In April 2025, 10 children ceased to be looked after, seven children returned home, one child was adopted, one turned 18 and receives leaving care support and one UASC turned 18, they are also receiving leaving care support.

25. We have 140 care leavers supported by the team aged 18-25. This is a reduction of three compared to last month. We also support 57 care experienced young people aged 16 and 17 years. We keep in touch with our care leavers and there are regular opportunities for them to come together for activities and support. Recent activities have involved Monthly Care Experienced Forums to get young people's input into service development, shows at the Hippodrome, monthly well-being walks, celebrating Easter by ensuring every care experienced young person and their children received an Easter Egg and mounting our plaque at the Positivitree.
26. The mentoring programme provides care-experienced adults with the opportunity to mentor younger children in care, as well as other care-experienced young people. To date, we have successfully recruited and trained 11 care-experienced young people as mentors.
27. Currently, 101 young people are engaged with the programme - an increase of 17 since March 2025. Of these, six are waiting to be matched with a mentor, and 14 have had planned endings to their mentoring relationships. This service is available to all teams supporting children and young people. The matching process has been overwhelmingly positive and emotionally rewarding for everyone involved. Many of our mentors are balancing employment and family life while still making time to support younger children in care. We are actively recruiting more mentors and have shortlisted 11 candidates. Interviews are scheduled for 11 June 2025.
28. We are utilising the YMCA three nights per week Monday, Tuesday and Thursday evenings, 5.30-7.30 for children in care youth provisions. Our Monday session supports children aged 5-11 and we have a minimum of 12 children attending each week. Our Tuesday/Thursday Secondary school aged children group receives a minimum of 15 young people attending each week.
29. Once per month we enjoy a Care leaver walks with groups of 10+ people attending each session.
30. Safe space was a youth provision operated by the team for children in our care. It is a mix of social and focused activities aimed at reducing loneliness, anti-social behaviour and supporting children's emotional health. We received 12 months funding for this project, which ended October 2024. We have submitted a funding application to the Rotary Club to support with some of the costs to continue this valuable support to children in our care. We continue to wait for invite to attend a full Rotary meeting to present the project.
31. Staying Close continues to enhance the support provided to our young people who are preparing to leave care; we are currently supporting 24 young people. This number remains consistent as young people come to the end of their support journey and have achieved their goals. The project has supported 40 young people since April 2023 and 18 young people have successfully moved onto their own accommodation. The project offers a six-days-per-week service for young people most in need. Some feedback from the young people and their workers "she makes sure I'm getting the help I need", "she always

listens to me, gives amazing advice, she never lets me down”, “the targeted support offered to this young person by the staying close PA has been crucial to their success”, “The support I have got is the best”.

32. We received confirmation of government grant funding for Staying Close Project for a further year which is great news! This will allow us to continue with the development the service and support more young people to successfully progress to independence.

### **Fostering and Supported Lodgings**

33. As at the end of April 2025, we had 61 approved foster carer households, 32 of which are supporting 79 children, 28.4% of which are long term matched. We have 49 approved connected carers, with 32 households supporting 42 children, accounting for 29.6 % of the children that are in foster care.
34. Fostering Recruitment has seen an upturn in the months of April/May 2025. We received five expressions of Interest in April and May 2025. Of these five expressions of interest, three have progressed to assessment, one is in application stage and one applicant withdrew.
35. In May 2025 we had one foster carer approved at panel, this is in addition to three foster carer approvals in April 2025 totalling four new Foster Carers for this new financial year.
36. Fostering Fortnight in May 2025 included a social media campaign with videos from foster carers, staff and care experienced peer mentors, as well as a foster carer walk and foster carer recruitment tent for two days in the market.
37. Fostering with Northeast ran a campaign in conjunction with SMOOTH radio and had events across the Northeast at Teesside Park and Dalton Park locally.
38. The addition of a second panel monthly has supported with capacity to ensure that carers are not being unnecessarily delayed and waiting for approval. This has helped with connected foster carers. The additional panel has also allowed the team to catch up with first annual reviews. We had a backlog of reviews due to prioritising Form K and Fostering Assessments.

### **Foster Carer Recruitment**

39. Our 2025 recruitment strategy alongside Fostering with North East’s recruitment is to target certain key dates this year, these include:
  - (a) Fostering Fortnight – May 2025
  - (b) World Refugee Day – June 2025
  - (c) Supported Lodgings Week – July 2025
  - (d) Kinship Carers Week – October 2025
40. We will adopt a co-ordinated approach within the council using our social media, PR, and marketing to really sell and support our fostering offer. Events such as bowling, attending Hope Town etc and events at local amenities during the above weeks can create some good content and awareness.

41. We continue to promote recruitment through the DBC Facebook page. We have established monthly meetings between the team and colleagues in Communications. This will ensure that Fostering is covered regularly in the One Darlington Magazine, and we will twin-track this by pushing live news and information through social media.

### **Homes for our Children**

42. CEDARS manager has submitted their Ofsted paperwork, we are awaiting Ofsted to contact us and progress the registration.
43. Butterfield received their first Ofsted inspection and received a grading of Good with only one recommendation.
44. Gilling children's home repurposing is progressing with the home to be called Blossom. We have a project plan in place, and we are aiming for Ofsted registration paperwork to be submitted at the beginning of August. Job adverts for staff will be advertised imminently with a projected recruitment timescale of approximate three months from interview.
45. Re-purpose of Dunrobin - the new home in Sherbourne Close will be ready in September 2025. We are working on a plan to register the home with Ofsted and then move staff and children.
46. All three mainstream children's homes are running at full capacity with three children in each home.

### **Education**

47. From September 2025, the introduction of 30 hours of funded childcare for eligible working parents of babies from 9 months up to 3 years old (where eligibility will match the existing 3 and 4-year-old 30 hours offer).
48. Evidence suggests that the childcare market in Darlington has been able to accommodate an increase in demand following the first two phases of childcare entitlement expansion. There is an overall sufficiency of places to meet the current demand from parents in Darlington. The DfE share ECS code validation rates with LAs showing the number of childcare codes validated and verified by Darlington residents. For summer and autumn 2024, Darlington's validation rate has been above the national rate.
49. In early 2023, funding was made available by the Department for Education for local authorities to fund capital projects in schools and settings to deliver expansion of entitlement and/or wraparound places. Six projects are being funded in Darlington schools and settings. These projects will deliver up to an additional 65 wraparound places, 36 entitlement places for 2-year-olds and 60 entitlement places for mixed ages.
50. A higher proportion of Darlington primary schools have nurseries than nationally (68% in Darlington v. 20% nationally).
51. Four Darlington schools applied for capital funding and all four were successful in securing the funding to enable them to open or expand their nursery in September 2025.

## Youth Unemployment

52. The Darlington 18-24 claimant count has risen from 6.6% (495 young people) in January 2025 to 6.9% (520 young people) in April 2025, a rise of 0.3%. This is probably the result of seasonal jobs from the Christmas period ending.
53. Darlington at 6.9% is still higher than North-East average (6.0%) and National average (5.6%). In the same period the North-East average only rose by 0.1%, however the England average rose by 0.3%, in the same period.
54. April 2025 figures for the Tees Valley show a 0.3% increase for all the Tees Valley local authorities except Redcar which only increased by 0.1% (January 2025 figures in brackets):
  - (a) 8.8% (8.5%) Hartlepool
  - (b) 8.5% (8.2%) Stockton
  - (c) 8.1% (7.8%) Middlesbrough
  - (d) 7.4% (7.3%) Redcar & Cleveland
  - (e) 6.9% (6.6%) Darlington

## Darlington Employment Initiative (DEI)

55. The DEI programme is funded through UKSPF and the target group is economically inactive people of working age. The priority groups are; over 50 early retirees, those looking after the family or home and those who are short term sick (less than 12 months).
56. The two staff started the programme mid-February 2024. The current programme was due to run until 31 March 2025, but has been extended for a further year. The target original was for 104 starts with 24 participants in employment by programme end, we are just waiting on revised targets.
57. By the end of April 2025, the team had engaged 174 participants (against an overall contract target of 104) with 85 moved into employment (against an overall contract target of 24). Of those above 82 of the 174 participants were aged 16-24 (47%) with 40 of those moving into work (49%).

## Youth Guarantee Trailblazer

58. The government set aside £45m to establish eight Youth Guarantee Trailblazer areas to test new ways of supporting young people (18-21 year olds) into employment or training, by bringing together and enhancing existing programmes in partnership with local areas. The Trailblazer was due to start on 1 April 2025 for a year. TVCA was able to submit a bid for up to £5m with the target group being those 18-21 year olds on benefits. TVCA bid has been approved, and they are currently holding discussions with individual local authorities. The proposed workstreams are as follows (potential leads):
  - (a) Convene key service providers and organisations (TVCA)
  - (b) Deliver a programme of paid work placements and non-paid work tasters (LAs)
  - (c) Test different methodologies for building engagement with young people (LAs)
  - (d) Engage and support those leaving Year 13 without a positive destination (LAs)



- (e) Mapping an analysis of current landscape and provision (TVCA)

### **Children's Commissioning and Contracts**

59. Further work has been successfully undertaken to embed the Darlington Young Carers Memorandum of Understanding through a second launch event at the end of April. The voice of Darlington Young Carers has been particularly prominent through the launch. Several bespoke videos have been developed by Darlington Young Carers for different target audiences including; top tips for young carers and professionals. Additional analytical work is being undertaken by children's commissioning to review the school census data in relation to Young Carers to enable targeted work with Family Action and Schools to ensure that there are no Wrong Doors for Young Carers in Darlington.
60. The provision of Ofsted Registered Supported Accommodation for young people aged 16-17 years old has been expanded through the newly developed Butlers Grange provision operated by ROC Group. The provision is already providing positive opportunities for a range of Darlington young people including young people stepping down from residential care and those ready to begin their next chapter of preparation for adulthood.

### **Darlington Safeguarding Partnership**

61. The new Multi-Agency Safeguarding Partnership arrangements became effective on 1 April 2025 with James Stroyan, Executive Director of People stepping in as Partnership Chair for the coming year. In light of these new arrangements, the Partnership will be reviewing its terms of reference and governance to ensure all groups are explicit about their roles and responsibilities. The partnership is currently in the process of appointing an Independent Scrutineer who will focus on quality assurance and organisational scrutiny and help to strengthen the multi-agency safeguarding partnership arrangements.
62. The Multi-Agency Safeguarding Partnership Group met on 2 April, the agenda covered the new multi-agency Safeguarding Partnership arrangements, the findings of the Child J Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review published in February this year and a focus on the strategic approach to Suicide Prevention in Darlington, considering its current position and how partner agencies may contribute to this collaborative work. The Partnership bid a fond farewell to Ann Baxter, Independent Chair/Scrutineer who has provided an invaluable contribution to the Partnership over a significant period.

### **HAF - Holiday Activity and Food Programme**

63. The Move More Team engaged 970 participants at Easter. Funded by the DfE the HAF programme offers free activities and nutritious meals for all eligible young people aged 5 - 16 years in Darlington. The activities, which are all delivered by professional staff, will include a nutritious meal for every participant at each event, taking place at various locations across the town, which included sports, arts and crafts, cooking and much more. A range of activity sessions were also made available for children and families with additional needs (SEND)