

COUNCIL
2 OCTOBER 2025

OVERVIEW OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE PORTFOLIO

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

Tackling Child Poverty

2. On 13th October 2025, we are welcoming the North East Child Poverty Commission to Darlington - it is holding its regular meeting here in the Borough focusing on child poverty here in the Tees Valley. So much progress is being made in the North East Combined Authority, and there is much more that can be done by partners here across the sub-region.
3. There will be presentations on partnerships across the Tees Valley, and a strategic discussion on Tees Valley wide action on child poverty: opportunities and barriers. I have met with Amanda Bailey, the Director of the North East Poverty Commission in advance, and will report back to Council regarding the action points from the session.

Early Intervention and Front Door

Children's Initial Advice Team

4. The Children's Initial Advice Team (CIAT) continues to operate as a stable and effective service, maintaining a strong focus on relational practice and ensuring that children and families receive the right support at the right time. The team remains committed to achieving the best possible outcomes through timely and proportionate decision-making.
5. Recent performance data, audit findings, and feedback indicate that CIAT is consistently facilitating appropriate service responses without delay. This reflects the team's ongoing efforts to ensure that decisions are proportionate, unnecessary social care assessments are avoided, and that safeguarding remains paramount. CIAT's approach ensures that children are protected and that the support provided is tailored to meet the individual needs of families.
6. To strengthen our offer around child exploitation, structural changes have been implemented with the Exploitation Team Manager, now located within the Care Planning structure to enhance strategic oversight and integration. Collaborative work has also taken place to review exploitation processes and procedures, ensuring they remain robust and responsive.

Building Stronger Families Service

7. Caseloads remain high within the service owing to high levels of demand, however it is encouraging that external Early Help Assessment's (EHA's) completed by partner agencies are increasing with an encouraging uptake of collaborative working. Work is ongoing to scrutinise the data to ensure that families receive the right service at the right time.
8. The Building Stronger Families management team continue to move the offer to one that is locality based, in line with the way social care teams deliver their service. Development of locality working for universal and targeted early help is in its early stages but is timely given the Families First for Children social care reform work that will increase at pace over 2025 and into 2026. Given the impact this will have across both internal and external partner agencies, it requires a collaborative approach, mapping out the localities and how the new process will work in practice, ensuring that families continue to receive a seamless and proportionate service.

Young People's Engagement and Justice Service (YPEJS)

9. We have recently been inspected by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) under the new regime. It focussed on the partnership arrangements when working with children and families. The focus was less on process and more engaging in a Child First approach. Under the new inspection arrangements, Victim Standards are now inspected in their own right, and members should be assured that our offer for victims has been highlighted as best practice by the Youth Justice Board. We are expecting the full report in a few weeks time.
10. On 31st July I attended our Multi-Agency Safeguarding Partnership, which is now chaired by Children's Services' AD Chris Bell under the new arrangements. There were presentations on under 18 self harm admissions to County Durham & Darlington NHS Foundation Trust 2023-24, and Rape and Sexual Offences Delivery Group progress and overview of current context of sexual violence and future changes. These were important and thought-provoking pieces, and I am reflecting both with officers and colleagues on any issues that we as a local authority can take forwards.

Safeguarding Assessment and Care Planning including Children with Disabilities

11. Since the strategic and operational responsibilities for exploitation have moved there has been a new procedure developed and agreed at the Senior Leadership Team meeting (SLT) which will be presented to the Strategic Child Exploitation Group in September. This provides a clear framework of intervention and support for children experiencing or at risk of experiencing exploitation. Ongoing development to introduce harm away from home conferences for children at risk of significant harm due to exploitation are taking place and will hopefully lead to the instigation of these meetings in the Autumn. In response to the Casey Report an audit jointly with Durham Constabulary and Durham County Council took place on 8 August 2025 to look at a cross-section of Police contacts where sexual abuse or harm is identified.
12. There remain challenges within the assessment and safeguarding service due to staff sickness which is impacting on workloads. To support with this a Child in Need pilot team commenced on 18 August 2025 which is a team of five Child and Family Assessment Workers (Family Workers) who case hold children in need. This is in line with the national changes which allows for non-social workers to case hold. This will be robustly monitored

by the senior leadership team as well as a dedicated Team Manager who will ensure weekly management oversight is recorded. This will both support capacity within the assessment and safeguarding teams as well as allowing us to pilot the new approach in readiness for national changes.

13. Training has taken place with the Children's Front Door to improve screening of requests for Children with Disabilities assessments following learning from complaints. This approach has seen a reduction in complaints over the last 12 months as highlighted in the annual compliments, complaints and comments report. A dedicated Children with Disabilities Social Worker is completing Social Care Advice in consultation with the SEND team to enable better quality advice to be offered where an EHCP is being considered.
14. In line with the changes within the exploitation service, a commissioning arrangement with Barnardo's is due to come to an end on 31 August 2025. In readiness for this we have developed our Keeping Families Together team to be able to offer both targeted and intensive support for children experiencing exploitation. To further support social workers a duty family support worker is providing daily support to the teams to enable them to focus on social work tasks.

Looked After and Care Leaver information

Children in our Care and Care Leavers

15. Data from 30 June 2025 evidenced we had 269 children in our care, with 25 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 June 2025, nine children ceased to be looked after, one child became subject to an Special Guardianship Order (SGO), four turned 18 and receive leaving care support and two Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking children (UASC) turned 18, who are both now receiving care leaver's support.
16. At the end of July 2025, we have 138 care leavers supported by the team aged 18-25. This is a reduction of two compared to last month. We also support 59 care experienced young people aged 16 and 17 years this is an increase of 2 meaning we continue to support 197 care experienced young people overall.
17. 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 celebrating refugee week by having a celebratory meal, taking part in a national leaving care football tournament in Wolverhampton and a trip to the cricket. We have also met with MP Lola McEvoy for a Q&A session, and this will become a six-monthly event.
18. We have celebrated one of our Staying Close Personal Advisors securing a 90% reduction on water rates which when fully rolled out will benefit care leavers across the country. The Director of Resources Group have agreed to a reciprocal arrangement between the 12 North East Local Authorities to fund the payment of Council Tax for care leavers. Free bus travel across the Tees Valley is on track to be in place in the autumn.
19. The mentoring programme offers the opportunity for care experienced adults to become mentors for younger children in care and our care experienced young people.

20. We have successfully recruited and trained 11 care experienced young people. We currently have 100 young people attached to the programme with five young people waiting to be matched to a mentor, we have 24 planned endings from the project, an increase of 23 young people in March 2025.
21. We have successfully recruited and additional 10 peer mentors with pre-employment checks ongoing. This will allow the service to reach out to support more children in our care.
22. We are utilising the Young Men's Christian Association (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 12 children attending each week. Our Tuesday/Thursday Secondary school aged children group receives a minimum of 15 young people attending each week.
23. On 7th August 2025 I visited YMCA's The Haven project and was blown away by the youth facilities and opportunities on offer. Together with my ward colleagues, I have been promoting The Haven and what it has to offer as a youth club and so much more via our Houghton Matters Facebook page, and I would encourage members to pay a visit themselves and get the word out!
24. Once per month we enjoy care leaver walks with groups of 10+ people attending each session.
25. 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. We have been invited to attend a meeting with the Rotary Club in September to present Safe Space provision, we will hopefully be offered some funding support to restart an element of the project.
26. Staying Close continues to strengthen the support offered to young people preparing to leave care. We are pleased to share that the project has secured an additional year of funding from the Department for Education, recognising the vital role it plays in helping young people transition from care to independent living.
27. Currently, we are supporting 25 young people, a number that remains steady as individuals complete their support journey and achieve their personal goals. Since April 2023, the project has supported a total of 40 young people. Through close collaboration with the taster flat registered manager, semi-independent accommodation providers, and Housing Services, we have successfully transitioned 20 young people into more independent living arrangements.
28. Feedback from both young people and professionals continues to be overwhelmingly positive. One professional shared:

“Her passion and drive for her role shines through! I’ve worked with many young people’s personal advisors over the years, and she truly stands out—she’s a credit to your team!”

29. On 23rd July together with officers I attended a regional conference in Durham where care experienced young people drove the agenda and gave the presentations. It focused on young people’s experience of care, and at times was profoundly moving and thought-provoking, both for professionals and elected members. Together with members of our Corporate Parenting Panel, I am looking at how CPP meetings can better engage with our care experienced young people, and drive change. The conference gave both myself and officers food for thought on how that is relevant for Darlington.
30. On 20th August, I attended a Party in the Garden at Harewood Hill Lodge. It was brilliant meeting the young people who attend respite care there and their families, and hear how the Lodge is making a real and positive difference to their lives.
31. On 28th August, together with the Mayor and Cllr. Harker, I attended the Children in our Care celebration event. Members will be aware that we have been holding very successful celebration events for care leavers, and this replicated the awards ceremony for children and young people currently in our care. There were so many inspirational stories for children, their carers and professionals to celebrate, and it will certainly be replicated in future years.

Fostering and Supported Lodgings

32. As at the end of June 2025, we have 61 approved foster carer households who could provide fostering households for 84 children. 39 households are providing fostering households for 62 children. 28.7% of children are long term matched. We have 30 Kinship foster caring households providing homes to 39 children accounting for 28.5% of children in care therefore being placed within Kinship fostering households.
33. In the months of April, May and June we have had seven expressions of interest. Of these seven, two applicants withdrew from the process with three carers seeking to progress to assessment and two are at application stage.
34. In May, there we featured in One Darlington with numerous Darlington foster carers, describing why they love to foster for Darlington. Members of the Fostering Team have also completed regular wellness and wellbeing walks with foster carers. This promotes a sense of community when observed together, often sparking up conversations with members of the community regarding fostering as well as uniting our current foster carers, giving them opportunities to make friends and build networks. The Fostering Team welcomed a support worker into the team, they will lead the team in regard to recruitment and retention over the upcoming summer months.
35. The addition of a second panel monthly has supported with capacity to ensure that carers are not being unnecessarily delayed and waiting for approval. The team has successfully ensured that all foster carer reviews are held and presented to panel within timescale.

Homes for our Children

36. The CEDARS manager has submitted their Ofsted paperwork. We continue to await Ofsted to contact us and progress the registration.
37. Gilling children's home repurposing is progressing with the home to be called Blossom. We are identifying young people who would benefit from moving into the home. We are awaiting fire risk assessment report and replacement of one bedroom window, this work is managed through ongoing project plan, we are aiming for Ofsted registration paperwork to be submitted in August 2025. Job adverts for staff are live with a projected recruitment timescale of approximate three months from interview.
38. The proposed move of homes from Dunrobin to the new home in Sherbourne Close was expected to be ready in September 2025. This has been pushed back to November 2025 a plan is being worked on to register the home with Ofsted and then move staff and children.
39. All three mainstream children's homes are running at full capacity with three children in each home.

Education

40. Darlington College, in collaboration with Darlington Borough Council, national charity DFN Project SEARCH offers a supported internship program for young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) with major local employer Amazon. The first year of the programme has been completed with four young people obtaining full-time employment at the end of their internship. The partnership is intending to increase the number of internships available to Darlington young people in the second year of the programme.

Youth Unemployment

41. The Darlington 18-24 claimant count has risen slightly from 7.0% (525 young people) in March 2025 to 7.1% (530 young people) in June 2025, a rise of 0.1%.
42. Darlington at 7.1% is still higher than North-East average (5.9%) and National average (5.5%). In the same period both the North-East average and the England average fell by 0.1%.
43. June 2025 figures for the Tees Valley show the claimant count for Hartlepool, Stockton and Redcar all fell, whilst Darlington and Middlesbrough increased slightly (March 2025 figures in brackets):
 - (a) 8.3% (8.9%) Hartlepool
 - (b) 8.3% (8.2%) Middlesbrough
 - (c) 8.2% (8.5%) Stockton
 - (d) 7.1% (7.0%) Darlington
 - (e) 7.0% (7.6%) Redcar & Cleveland

Darlington Employment Initiative (DEI)

44. 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).
45. The two staff started the programme mid-February 2024. The current programme was due to run until 31 March 2026. The target original was for 104 starts with 24 participants in employment by programme end, we are just waiting on revised targets.
46. By the end of June 2025, the team had engaged 194 participants (against an overall contract target of 238 to the end of March 2026) with 103 moved into employment (against an overall contract target of 55). Of those above 88 of the 194 participants were aged 16-24 (45%) with 46 of those moving into work (52%).

Youth Guarantee Trailblazer

47. 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. Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA) was able to submit a bid for up to £5m with the target group being those 18-21 year olds on benefits.
48. SBC as lead authority has issued a letter of intent on 15 July to award a grant of up to £196,165 to Darlington Borough Council, to deliver activity under the TVCA's Youth Guarantee Trailblazer Programme, supporting inclusive growth and the progression of young people into education, employment, or training during the period 1 July 2025 - 31 March 2026. However, Darlington will now need to recruit staff on a fixed-term contract to deliver.

Children's Commissioning and Contracts

49. The review of the required resourcing arrangements for Children's placements (Children's Social Care and SEND) has concluded. Officers are currently mobilising substantive arrangements. The priorities of the review included:
 - (a) Reflection upon the strengths and limitations of the interim placement configuration;
 - (b) Identification of opportunities to improve service stability and resilience;
 - (c) Sustainment of the significant levels of cost avoidance achieved;
 - (d) Maintaining the positively impactful provider relations developed;
 - (e) Effectively responding to the increasing complexity of placement requirements;
 - (f) Ensuring statutory timeframes are adhered to.
50. The reconfigured placement arrangements are expected to take effect from autumn following the conclusion of the recruitment to substantive Placement Assistant posts.
51. Children's commissioners continue to proactively engage with subregional and regional workstreams. Through regional opportunities Darlington has successfully secured a number of small targeted non-recurrent grants to take forward key strategic priorities. The most recent award will enhance the mobilisation and embedding of the Inclusion Charter in educational setting in Darlington (cross-phase from Early Years to post 16).

Darlington Safeguarding Partnership

52. The Management Group is a newly established decision-making group made up of the Delegated Safeguarding Partners. It has oversight of child and adult strategic and operational activities and they met on 23 June 2025. The focus of the agenda was roles and responsibilities of the partnership's sub-groups in line with new safeguarding partnership arrangements. It was agreed, whilst the new arrangements are now in place, further discussion is required to consider what is needed in respect of governance and accountability to ensure the groups are clear on their roles and responsibilities. Chairs of the sub-groups provided an overview of activity, summarising what they have achieved or is ongoing along with any issues or areas of concern.
53. The Lead Safeguarding Partners Strategic Group met on 7 July 2025 and agreed its Terms of Reference. Partners are aware of the work ongoing through the Management Group on the roles and responsibilities of sub-groups. Partners were provided an overview of activity from the Management Group and sub-groups and the current position of the Integrated Care Board Reforms.
54. The Partnership will be focusing on the Children First reforms and the statutory responsibilities on the Partnership over the coming months, having heard an overview of the current status in Darlington. The Bill has not yet completed its circuit through Parliament. The Early Help Strategic Board has oversight, and the next stage is partnership engagement and local design of services and how that will work in Darlington.

HAF - Holiday Activities and Food Programme

55. The HAF programme (Holiday Activities and Food) is for children aged 5 – 16 who are eligible for benefits related free school meals. The programme has been running over the summer holidays at venues across the town. Over 100 events were made available, and activities including trips to Beamish, surfing, NE Wake Park and Kirkletham Owl centre as well as enrichment activities in the town including 4motion, top up swimming, learn to ride sessions, bowling and Sim King Gaming.

Councillor Nick Wallis
Children and Young People Portfolio