

COUNCIL
26 MARCH 2026

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.

Ofsted Inspection of Children's Services

2. An Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) took place between 2nd and 13th February 2026. The Inspection involved a combination of off-site data and performance analysis and visits to Darlington by an Inspection team to judge the quality of children's services practice. As portfolio holder, I met with the lead inspector to discuss the progress we have made as a service. The Inspection leads to individual judgements of either Outstanding, Good, Requires Improvement or Inadequate in the following domains;
 - (a) The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection
 - (b) The experiences and progress of children in care
 - (c) The experiences and progress of care leavers
 - (d) The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families
 - (e) Overall effectiveness
3. At the time of writing the findings of Ofsted remain embargoed until they are published on 24th March 2026.

Tackling Child Poverty

4. On 11th February I attended the North East Child Poverty Commission as a board member, in Newcastle. We heard from Mairi Warrington from the Government's Child Poverty Unit, with an update on the new national child poverty strategy, 'Our Children, Our Future', following its publication on 5th December.
5. We looked at the scale of the challenge ahead – with 4.5 million UK children in relative poverty after housing costs and 2 million UK children in deep material poverty. The nature of the issue since the last time there was a national child poverty strategy has also changed, with a growth in poverty for larger families (3+ children); families where someone has a disability; and increasingly for families in work – alongside a growth in the depth of poverty experienced by children.
6. As far as children are concerned, the strategy highlights the impact of shame, stigma, exclusion from social activities, and that for many 'growing up in poverty means growing up too soon and dealing with adult-like worries and anxieties. Alongside the action points across Government, including increasing family income (e.g. ending the two-child limit; National Living Wage increases; free breakfast clubs), reducing the cost of essentials (e.g. expanding Free School Meals; expanding the Holiday Activity Fund scheme; and £39bn on the Social and Affordable Homes programme, there will be better local support some of

which is evidenced in this report – the new Best Start Family Hubs; Pride in Place programme; and the £1bn Crisis & Resilience Fund).

7. A representative of Tees Valley Combined Authority attended, and it was really good to hear that on the back of our meeting in January that I referenced in my previous report, the Commission will be focussing on the Tees Valley and how, with the necessary political will, we can replicate the success that Mayor Kim McGuinness has had in the North East Combined Authority in taking forwards the child poverty agenda.

Early Intervention and Front Door

8. The Children's Initial Advice Team (CIAT), which forms part of the Children's Front Door, continues to operate as a stable and effective service. The team maintains a strong focus on relational practice while ensuring that children and families receive the right support at the right time and remain safe. CIAT is committed to achieving the best possible outcomes through timely and proportionate decision-making. Although the team receives a high number of contacts compared to statistical neighbours, the model promotes an effective partnership approach. A significant increase has been noted in police contacts resulting in a 'no further action' outcome; a deep dive is currently underway to understand this trend.
9. Recent performance data, audit findings, and feedback confirm that CIAT consistently facilitates appropriate service responses without delay. This reflects the team's ongoing efforts to ensure decisions are proportionate, unnecessary social care assessments are avoided, and safeguarding remains paramount. Work is scheduled for the New Year to undertake live call audits, ensuring the conversational model remains as effective as possible.
10. CIAT works collaboratively across the service to maintain a consistent focus on missing episodes for young people, regardless of where case responsibility lies. The team remains the strategic lead for children who go missing, with current priorities including the timely completion and quality of Return Home Interviews (RHIs), embedding this work into each child's plan. The Missing From Home Worker, previously commissioned by Barnardos, has now transferred into a permanent DBC post. This enables more flexibility particularly for children who may not live in Darlington but are in the North East as they are now offered an in-person missing from home interview.

Building Stronger Families Service

11. Significant progress is being made to ensure that McNay St is identified as a Best Start in Life Hub by end of March. Internal changes are being developed to guarantee that the hub includes a clinic room, breastfeeding facilities, and a food/clothes bank, which are all identified needs to be classified as a 'Hub'.
12. Multi agency meetings have been arranged and will commence imminently to ensure a holistic approach when mapping out service provision. Buy in from partner services has been integral and there is a real want to provide the best service for our families in the borough.
13. McNay Street Family Centre will transition to become the McNay Best Start in Life Family Hub, supported by additional Hubs across the Borough, referred to as 'spokes', which are

currently being identified. I have asked officers for an All-Member briefing to be arranged to bring Council colleagues up to speed with the Government's SEND reforms, and the Best Start in Life and Families First agendas.

Young People's Engagement and Justice Service (YPEJS)

14. The management team continue to develop service provision on the back of the HMIP findings. The strategic board partners have oversight of the Post Inspection Action Plan, providing a level of scrutiny to monitor progress made.
15. The service has one young person in custody currently. He turns 18 shortly and as such, transition work is underway to ensure that the move from youth to adult services is seamless. This is supported by our seconded Probation Officer.

Safeguarding Assessment and Care Planning including Children with Disabilities

16. There is a new Head of Service for this area, who commenced in post on 1st January 2026.
17. There has been a workstream completed focusing on ensuring where children are at risk of or experiencing harm outside the home their child exploitation matrix is reviewed and there has been an increase in timeliness in this area since this work was completed. The child exploitation pathway continues to be strengthened across the service and there is a clear understanding of children at risk of harm and actions being taken to reduce this harm.
18. Within the Assessment and Safeguarding Teams there has been a continued focus on assessment timeliness and statutory visits being completed in timescale. Team Managers now receive weekly performance reports which is starting to strengthen the work in this area and performance is starting to increase in timeliness with this higher level of focus but remains a targeted area of improvement.
19. Family Group Conferencing uptake continues to increase and families are now being allocated in a timely way following referral discussions taking place and the previous waiting list has now ended after the outcome of audit work led to small changes within service delivery. The changes in service delivery do not impact on families within the service or create delay.
20. There continues to be a Child in Need pilot team whereby non social workers hold children in need. This team is now staffed to capacity and audit work has shown the team provide good quality and timely support to families. We are now working towards expanding the remit of the team to pilot a Family Help model in line with the Families First Reforms to further test and understand the changes this will bring before wider implementations take place.

Looked After and Care Leaver information

21. We currently have 285 children in our care. This is a relatively static number with small areas of increase and decrease. We continue to experience significant challenges in finding homes for our children. This means we see more children entering residential care due to a lack of fostering families.

22. Our Children in our Care cohort is made up of 62 children living in care with friends or family, 45 in children's homes, 24 in supported accommodation, one in a pre-adoptive placement, 64 in in-house foster care, 58 in IFA foster care, 22 living with parents but looked after, one in a parent and child unit and four in unregistered or unregulated care. This is one child with complex disabilities living in an unregistered home and three children living with kinship carers who are not regulated.
23. We have a small number of children whose behaviour is challenging for others and they continue to struggle to have stability in their home. A weekly 'high risk' children meeting is in place chaired by the Head of Service to review those children we are most worried about and ensure they have the right support.
24. We currently support 131 care experienced adults aged 18+ and 69 16/17 year olds in the care leavers service. Over the next 12 months we want to explore how we can further strengthen our offer to care leavers and children in our care as corporate parents.

Fostering and Supported Lodgings

25. The government has announced a move towards regional fostering hubs completing end to end recruitment Initial discussions with Foster with North East are exploring how this will work for Darlington. This change will enable the in-house fostering team to focus on the support and retention of our current carers.
26. In Darlington we continue to offer a number of support groups such as for those carers who have babies and carers who care for teenagers. This enables carers to come together in supportive spaces to help each other.
27. During the February half term there were plans for a gaming afternoon, a soft play afternoon and coffee and cake session for our children and carers. This included children who foster. We also wanted to explore how we can further support children who foster as an organisation.

Homes for our Children

28. Cedars Childrens Home which was a short break and edge of care provision has now been amended to be a two bed mainstream children's home. Currently they care for one child whose needs mean other children cannot be matched alongside.
29. All children's homes have had 100% occupancy and one child has recently transitioned to a new home meaning we are actively exploring who could move into that bed.
30. Delays in opening Blossom have occurred due to issues with fire doors which are currently being rectified and we currently do not have a date for when Sherbourne will open. Recruitment is ongoing for a Responsible Individual to lead our children's homes.

Education

31. Polam Hall School was recently inspected by Ofsted. Inspectors recognised the vision of leaders that all pupils will flourish at Polam Hall. The school's personal development

programme has a considerable positive impact on pupils, and the impressive personal, social and health education programme ensures that pupils can reflect on world events and the experiences of others with maturity. Pupils' independence and confidence are developed at all stages of their school life, helping to make sure that pupils are ready for life after secondary school.

32. Work continues to be developed under the Darlington Inclusion Charter. With support from Shotton Hall Research School and a recently retired Darlington Headteacher the 'Everybody Talks in Darlington' project was launched in November 2025. An oracy (communication and spoken language) audit tool and talking toolkit have been co-produced. Training has been delivered on evidence based practice to support pupils' oracy skills. A further development session and training took place in February 2026, with more activity planned for the summer term.
33. Following an approach by the council, Zarach, the Children's Bed Charity, launched in Darlington in January. The charity takes referrals from schools and provides families experiencing bed poverty with a brand new bed, mattress and bedding to help them get a good night's sleep and a chance to thrive at school.

SEND Progress

34. On 13th March 2026 I attended the opening of Beaumont Hill College Academy, undertaken by Secretary of State the Rt. Hon. Bridget Phillipson MP. This now provides a dedicated 30-place setting for sixth-form students at Beaumont Hill, which in turn will create more spaces at Beaumont Hill's main setting. I was proud to be asked to say a few words in advance, as was our local MP Lola McEvoy. It was good to hear from Mike Butler, the Head of the Education Village Academy Trust just how positive they are for the practical support the Council has provided the Trust in delivering the scheme.
35. Together with the now-approved SEND Free School in Faverdale, the opening demonstrates the great strides we are making as far as SEND provision is concerned here in Darlington.
36. As portfolio lead, I attended the Schools Forum on 10th March 2026, the Let's Talk SEND parent/carers consultation event at the Hippodrome on 11th March 2026, and on 16th March 2026 held my regular catch-up meeting with leaders of Darlington's fantastic Parent Carer Forum.

HAF - Holiday Activities and Food Programme

37. The HAF programme (Holiday Activities and Food) is for children aged 5 – 16 who are eligible for benefits related free school meals. The programme ran over the Christmas holidays at venues across the town. Over 1900 places were made available and activities including trips to the Pantomime, Santa visits at Hopetown, The Polar Express, Raby Castle and Ice Skating as well as enrichment activities in the town including Swimming, Padel, Bowling and Sim King Gaming.

Youth Unemployment

38. The Darlington 18-24 claimant count has fallen slightly from 7.2% (540 young people) in September 2025 to 7.1% (530 young people) in December 2025, a fall of 0.1%.
39. Darlington at 7.1% is still higher than North-East average (6.2%) and National average (5.9%). In the same period the North-East average rose 0.1% and the England average both by 0.3%.
40. December 2025 figures for the Tees Valley show the claimant count for every authority with two authorities showing rising rates and three falling (September 2025 figures in brackets):
 - i. 8.7% (8.5%) Hartlepool
 - ii. 8.4% (8.8%) Stockton
 - iii. 8.0% (8.4%) Middlesbrough
 - iv. 7.4% (7.2%) Redcar & Cleveland
 - v. 7.1% (7.2%) Darlington

Darlington Employment Initiative (DEI)

41. The DEI programme is funded through UKSPF, with Hartlepool as the lead authority, 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). The programme started mid-February 2024 and will close on 31 March 2026.

Data to End of December 2025	16-24	25+	Total
Starts	138	116	254
Leavers	97	103	200
Leavers (into Employment)	51	67	118
Leavers (No Job)	46	36	82
On Programme	41	13	54

Youth Guarantee Trailblazer

42. 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. SBC is the lead authority for the Tees Valley and the main focus is getting young people out on work placements, both long-term paid and short-term un-paid.
43. The Trailblazer started in Darlington in September 2025 with a current contract until 31 March 2026, that is shortly to be extended to 31 March 2027, and to include 16 and 17 year olds. Work tasters have not proven popular with employers or young people. To date there are 16 young people on a six month placement and five on three month placements. There has been no take up of work tasters.

44. The team have engaged 59 employers 41 of which have expressed an interest in offering placements. Employers signed up to date are: Molson Group, Hiyed, Eric Knows, Hightech Industrial Access, The Dog Barn, Edward Robertson Ltd, Northern Heritage Engineering, Taurus Renewables, CL Construction, Tees Valley Community Church, Smart Homes, Secret Garden Ltd, Shape Café's, Baydale Beck, People Plus, Baltic, Learning A New Way, Aycliffe Filtration and Oxfam.

Children's Commissioning and Contracts

45. As part of the Best Start in Life programme, EasyPeasy have been contracted (go live from the 1st April 2026) to provide a digital home learning environment via a bespoke app-based parent programme. The app has a strong evidence base in supporting a good level of development in children aged five and under. Parents and carers in Darlington will be able access expert guidance and practical support to help their child learn and develop at home. The app provides thousands of simple tips and play-based activities using everyday items and offers tailored personalised support helping with routines; including but not limited to; brushing teeth, mealtimes, sleep, communication, and early learning.
46. The strategic expansion of Darlington based supported accommodation for young people continues. From February 2026, there are an additional four units of self-contained accommodation available for Darlington young people provided by Tees Valley YMCA.

Darlington Safeguarding Partnership

47. The Partnership's Lead Safeguarding Partners Strategic Group and Management Group have not met in this reporting period. The Multi-Agency Safeguarding Partnership Group met on 16 January, the agenda focused on the delivery of the Family First Partnership reforms and the ICB's Strategic Transition Programme.
48. The Family First reform discussion focussed on partnership working and the commitment to strengthening joint working in Darlington and any impact they may have on the integrated partnership arrangements. The Families First programme is designed to be a comprehensive, system-wide approach, focusing on early intervention and prevention, and ensuring that families are supported at the earliest possible stage. There was some nervousness expressed by Education colleagues as they are aware of issues being experienced in other partnership areas, these concerns were acknowledged and reference made to previous successful collaborative changes in Darlington. The reforms are underpinned by a commitment to partnership working, with an emphasis on shared responsibility and collaborative problem-solving across agencies. The group were assured that robust internal governance arrangements are in place and any risks associated with this transformation will be managed and monitored through a risk register, with oversight by the Program Board. The discussion also highlighted the importance of measuring impact and demonstrating the difference that the reforms are making. The need for clear and transparent reporting of outcomes was emphasised, as was the value of using data and evidence to inform decision-making and drive continuous improvement.
49. A presentation was provided by the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (ICB) on its Strategic Transition Programme, which will see the ICB move from nine directorates to five. The impact of these changes on safeguarding teams and partnership working was discussed, with recognition of the challenges posed by the reduction in

resources and the need for effective representation and attendance at partnership meetings. It was noted that while statutory duties will not change, the partners responsible for delivering them may do so, changes are intended to streamline with no planned transfer of statutory functions and the ICB will continue to work in partnership. The group noted the importance of retaining sight of statutory responsibilities and holding the ICB and other partners to account for any changes that may impact safeguarding, and there is a need to ensure that safeguarding, particularly for children, remains a priority in all documentation and planning. The need for clear communication and engagement with local partners was emphasised with an expectation having discussions prior to the implementation.

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Children and Young People Portfolio