

Cabinet

A meeting of Cabinet was held on Thursday 16th October 2025.

Present: Cllr Lisa Evans (Leader of the Council), Cllr Pauline Beall (Cabinet Member), Cllr Clare Besford (Cabinet Member), Cllr Nigel Cooke (Cabinet Member), Cllr Richard Eglington (Cabinet Member), Cllr Paul Rowling (Cabinet Member) and Cllr Norma Stephenson OBE (Cabinet Member).

Officers: Mike Greene, Peter Bell, Geraldine Brown, Julie Butcher, Angela Connor, Kirsty Grundy, Clare Harper, Gemma Mann, Majella McCarthy, Neil Mitchell, Ged Morton.

Also in attendance: Cllr Michelle Bendelow, Cllr Marc Besford, Cllr Carol Clark, Cllr Ray Godwin, Cllr Mick Moore, Cllr Ted Strike, Cllr Marcus Vickers and Cllr Sylvia Walmsley.

Apologies: None.

CAB/50/25 Evacuation Procedure

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and the evacuation procedure was noted.

CAB/51/25 Declarations of Interest

There were no interests declared.

CAB/52/25 Minutes

Consideration was given to the minutes of the meetings held on 16 October 2025.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 16 October 2025 be approved.

CAB/53/25 Stockton on Tees Plan - Progress 2025

Consideration was given to a report on the Stockton-on-Tees Plan.

Following Council agreement of the Stockton-on-Tees Plan in 2024, it was agreed that Cabinet would receive annual performance updates.

The indicators attached to the report provided Cabinet with an update on the Council's progress against the high-level outcomes identified in the Stockton-on-Tees Plan.

The Stockton-on-Tees Plan (2024) set a Vision for the future of the Borough, developed with communities, for communities:

Our Vision: Stockton-on-Tees is home. It's a warm and friendly place where we welcome others and come together as a single community. We are a diverse and inspiring Borough, culturally rich and with confidence in a future that we can all share and be proud of. At the economic heart of the Tees Valley, we are a dynamic, safe

and healthy place where everyone can grow and succeed. We will continue to work together to reduce inequalities and barriers to opportunity.

The wider plan was developed to reflect the drivers and priorities that can turn the Vision into reality, and included a picture of success, underpinned by key outcome measures (What success looks like - Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council).

Outcomes centre around the priority areas of:

- The best start in life to achieve big ambitions
- Healthy and Resilient Communities
- A Great Place to Live, Work and Visit
- An Inclusive Economy
- A Sustainable Council

The appendix to the report provided the first years' progress report against key outcome measures.

This included:

- Areas where the Council performs above the national average, and demonstrated strong performance trends aligned to the Council ambitions:

% of households in fuel poverty

% of children having a good level of development at foundation stage

Gross Value Added (GVA) per hour worked

- Areas where the Council shows strong performance relative to national averages, however there was a need to manage local trends to improve outcomes:

Average Attainment 8 score

- Areas where the Council demonstrates strong performance trends aligned to the Council ambitions:

Total recorded offences

Employment rate

- Known areas of challenge, which form the basis of targeted activity to improve outcomes:

% of 16 and 17 year olds who were not in education, employment or training

Healthy life expectancy

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

CAB/54/25 Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman Public Report following Investigation Reference 24 013 122

Consideration was given to a report on Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman Public Report following Investigation Reference 24 013 122.

On 24 July 2025, the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) issued a Public Interest Report concerning Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council's handling of a young person's Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plan. The Ombudsman determined that this case merited a public report because of its seriousness and the wider implications for service delivery and statutory compliance.

The Ombudsman found that the Council failed to secure the special educational provision set out in the young person's Plan and did not carry out the required annual review, despite sending correspondence to the family stating that a review had taken place. This resulted in the young person missing significant education and caused distress and uncertainty for the family. The investigation also revealed that this was not an isolated error: ninety-nine other families had been sent similar letters stating that annual reviews had been completed when no meeting or consultation had in fact taken place.

The report brought the Ombudsman's findings before Cabinet, as required by law, and sets out both the remedies directed by the Ombudsman and the action already taken by the Council.

The Ombudsman's investigation concerned a young person, referred to as Y, who had an Education, Health and Care Plan. The Council failed to secure the provision specified in that Plan and failed to carry out the required annual review. Nevertheless, correspondence was issued to Y's parent, Ms X, stating that a review had taken place.

As a consequence of these failings, Y missed four and a half terms of education between May 2023 and July 2024. The Ombudsman concluded that this amounted to maladministration causing injustice. The family experienced distress, frustration and uncertainty, and the young person was denied the support to which they were legally entitled.

The investigation also identified systemic failings. Between July 2024 and May 2025, the Council issued ninety-nine annual review letters recording reviews as complete when no meeting had been held. Although in most cases annual reviews were in fact carried out, this practice was misleading, risked masking gaps in provision, and undermined confidence in the Council's processes.

To remedy the injustice, the Ombudsman required the Council to apologise formally to Y and Ms X, to make a payment of £5,700 to recognise the lost education and a further £200 for the distress caused by misleading correspondence, and to repeat its earlier offer of £1,800 for the period prior to May 2023. The total redress of £7,700 had been funded from the SEND budget. The Council issued the apology on 14 August 2025 and completed the payments on 18 August 2025.

The Ombudsman also required the Council to write to the ninety-nine affected families to explain the error, to apologise, and to invite any concerns about their child's provision. Those letters were sent on 14 August 2025.

In terms of systemic improvement, the Ombudsman directed the Council to develop an action plan to ensure that every child and young person with an EHC Plan received an annual review each year. That plan must set out specific actions, timescales and resources, be approved by the relevant committee, and be monitored by both members and senior officers. The Ombudsman also required the Council to review its procedures for delivering Education Otherwise Than at School (EOTAS) provision and for securing post-16 placements, so that statutory requirements were met and provision was properly monitored.

The Council had accepted all of the Ombudsman's recommendations in full. Considerable progress had been made. The practice of issuing "no change" letters

had been stopped. All families who may have been affected have now had a full annual review. A strengthened annual review process was introduced in September 2025, with clear responsibilities and escalation points, and with regular oversight through the SEND Service Improvement Board. Revised procedures for EOTAS and post-16 placements had been drafted and were being implemented.

Cabinet was therefore asked to note both the seriousness of the Ombudsman's findings and the substantial steps already taken to put matters right.

RESOLVED that:-

1. The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's Public Interest Report (Investigation Reference 24 013 122) be noted.
2. The actions taken to date and the further steps being implemented to address the failings identified be endorsed.
3. The Council will implement the Ombudsman's recommendations in full and within the statutory timeframe, with progress reported to Cabinet until compliance is achieved.
4. The Executive Scrutiny Committee also considers the Ombudsman's findings and the Council's improvement actions and provide any further comment and recommendations to strengthen the improvement process.

CAB/55/25 Powering our Future - Transformation Review: Therapeutic Residential Care for Children Experiencing Mental Health Challenges and Behavioural Distress

Consideration was given to a report on Powering our Future - Transformation Review: Therapeutic Residential Care for Children Experiencing Mental Health Challenges and Behavioural Distress.

The purpose of the report was to appraise Cabinet of the successful submission of a bid to the Department of Education's Children's Home Capital Programme 2025 to 2029. The bid would provide 50% capital funding to purchase two properties with a total of 3 places, for children experiencing mental health challenges and behavioural distress. The report outlined the proposal for the provision of two homes in Stockton-on-Tees following a comprehensive review, options appraisal and development of a business case. The objective was to address the need for specialist placements within Stockton-on-Tees for the most vulnerable children.

The proposal aimed to build sufficiency within the mainstream residential estate to avoid having to place children in external private provider care, which was often unregulated and costly, providing limited value for money. Providing residential care locally would support better outcomes for children in our care and help give them a better start in life.

The report was an important part of the approach to reducing inequality by prioritising support to enable more children to live within safe and inclusive communities.

The Council's Mission Statement and wider Powering Our Future Programme, prioritised supporting more children to live in safe and inclusive communities that

provide them with opportunities to thrive. This means working differently with communities, to harness the strengths that exist to build resilience and independence.

In April 2024, Cabinet agreed to a review of Children in our Care as part of phase 1 of the Transformation Programme. This provided clarity on the scope and objectives for the review, in alignment with the Council's Mission Statement.

The review led to a comprehensive understanding of challenges making use of research, data and intelligence. Findings and drivers for change along with options and proposals were summarised within the report.

Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council faced challenges with a high number of children in care (591 as at 24/09/25) of which there were 71 (as at 24/09/25) in external residential care. Of those children in external residential care, 16 were placed in high-cost placements (over £8,000 per week). The average cost was £11,300, with the highest being £16,000 per week. Most of these placements were unregulated. These were the most costly services and were often out of area.

Recent national, regional and local research undertaken by Newton Europe on behalf of the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) validates the need for additional residential placements for children with complex needs. The average weekly cost for residential care had increased significantly between 2020 and 2024 from £4,000 per week to £6,000 per week. However, the cost of placements can increase significantly for those in unregulated provision to over a minimum of £9,000 with no ceiling price for children and young people with extremely high complex needs. The proportion of children in residential care had risen, and there was a notable increase in children entering care aged 10 years and older.

The costs associated with using external providers were extremely high, this was a national issue and not just an issue for Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council. Additionally, the lack of local placements meant social workers must travel long distances to visit children, increasing workloads and reducing the frequency of contact. External providers often serve short notice on placements, causing instability and escalating children's needs, which leads to a cycle of increasingly complex needs and higher costs.

Unregulated residential provision was unlawful and required additional risk management if a child was placed in this type of care. This practice had brought scrutiny from Ofsted, the Department for Education and the Children's Commissioner, highlighting the urgent need for more regulated residential options for children with complex needs. The acknowledgement that changes were required resulted in the Department for Education offering Local Authorities the opportunity to bid for funding from the Children's Home Capital Programme 2025 to 2029.

Whilst the recently approved Fostering Cabinet paper would support the recruitment of individuals who can develop the requisite skills to care for children with complex needs. There was an acknowledgement that not all children would be suitable for a foster placement, particularly those with significant mental health needs, trauma and challenging behaviours that required a higher staff base such as one to one, or two to one.

The criteria for the capital programme were very specific and restricted and can only be used to provide a service to respond to the needs of children at risk of having their

Deprivation of Liberty (DOLs) compromised or at the edge of being admitted to secure mental health units.

Options were appraised based on the grant conditions criteria as follows:-

1. Do Nothing

No investment - Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council will continue to rely on unregistered and unstable residential provision, that does not provide a child with complex needs the opportunity to maintain their local networks, access mental health support or have a multi-disciplinary therapeutic response to dealing with trauma all of which leads to poorer outcomes for children.

2. Provide One Solo Home and One Dual Home (preferred option) This option is recommended due to its balanced approach to investment, support, and whilst the project is expected to be cost neutral rather than making savings, the impact for our most vulnerable children and their families will be more impactful, particularly in relation to caring for the children within their own communities, close to their support networks and with a comprehensive package of support and the right level of access to a multi-disciplinary team to deal with their ongoing traumas.

Providing children with residential services managed and controlled by the Council will offer stability of placement leading to less breakdowns of care. Give those children access to services that they are unable to access when placed outside of the borough, for example health services support, CAMHS and Educational support to improve outcomes.

3. Provide Two Solo Homes Develop 2 solo homes for 2 children This option would provide 2 placements for children in our care and would be managed via a cluster arrangement.

The preferred option following evaluation of each and their potential to address the key issues, financial implications, and overall impact on achieving better outcomes for children is option 2: provide one solo and one dual home.

RESOLVED that:-

1. Inclusion in the Capital Programme be approved of a scheme to deliver two Council-run children's homes (one solo and one dual) providing three places in total, based on current estimated total capital costs of £1.467 million.

2. The Council's match-funding requirement of £733,500 be met from the existing Council Wide Investment Fund approved by Council in February 2025, utilising prudential borrowing already authorised within that approval, with associated borrowing costs to be met from within Children's Services budgets through reduced reliance on external placements.

3. The Director of Children's Services, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, the Director of Regeneration and Inclusive Growth, the Chief Financial Officer, and the Director of Corporate Services be authorised to:

- a. identify and acquire two suitable properties within the approved budget envelope;
- b. procure and let contracts for design, refurbishment, fit-out and equipment; and

- c. take all necessary steps to register and operationalise the homes in line with the grant conditions and regulatory requirements.

CAB/56/25 Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Alternative Provision (AP) Strategy 2025 - 2030

Consideration was given to a report on Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Alternative Provision (AP) Strategy 2025 – 2030.

The report provided an overview of the updated SEND and AP strategy for 2025-2030 for the local area partnership. The local area partnership brought together children, young people, parents, carers, education, health and social care services, all of whom share responsibility for the strategic commissioning, management, delivery and evaluation of arrangements for children and young people with SEND aged 0-25 years and those who may require alternative provision in Stockton-on-Tees.

A 2024 report commissioned by the Local Government Association and County Councils network highlighted the breadth of challenges that were facing the SEND system nationally. The report described the SEND system as reaching breaking point, driven by key factors including:

- More children than ever before are being identified as having SEND, with the rise in the number of pupils in schools with Education, Health and Care plans far outstripping the overall rise of the school population.
- More children and young people with SEND have needs that are not met in mainstream education and require specialist provision, with a corresponding substantial rise in placements in independent and non-maintained special schools of 132%.
- More money than ever before is being invested in the SEND system, but this is not keeping pace with what is being spent (the high needs funding deficit), representing significant budget pressures for local authorities, education and health services.
- Outcomes for children and young people with SEND overall have not improved.

A government schools' white paper was expected to be published in the Autumn which would outline the detail of intended reforms to the SEND system. The SEND and AP strategy had been developed with a clear set of guiding priorities and commitments, with sufficient flexibility to be able to respond to the coming changes of the SEND landscape following the publishing of the white paper.

Over the last 12 months a process of self-evaluation, benchmarking, refresh of the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and development of local area inclusion plan had deepened the understanding of the needs of our children and young people with SEND and those who may require alternative provision, and the challenges facing the local system including:

- The number of children and young people with SEND is projected to rise across all educational settings (mainstream, special and resourced provision) over the coming years.
- Pupils with EHC and SEND support plans have consistently higher absence rates than those with no identified SEND.

- There is an attainment gap between children and young people with SEND and their peers across every phase of education.
- Our local system partners are reporting that needs for children are emerging earlier and becoming more complex.
- There is a high demand for health services, reflected in waiting times for specialist services such as speech and language therapy, and the number of children and young people on the neurodevelopmental pathway.
- Increased demand and financial pressure across children's social care, SEND high needs funding and adult social care services.

Action to address these challenges over the past 12 months included:

- We have worked in partnership with schools, stakeholders, parents and carers to transform our current enhanced mainstream provision model into additional resourced provision and SEND units. This has created 155 school places which will provide children and young people with the support they need in the borough.
- We have expanded our holiday and term-time activities to offer children and young people with SEND the opportunity to take part in positive activities within their communities. Over our easter and summer holidays are fun activities in 2025, there were 1066 SEND specific places available offering activities including swimming, gymnastics, quiet climbing sessions and creative activities.
- We have carried out a comprehensive review and reshaping of our alternative provision model. Our new model is now fully staffed and will focus on providing robust support at an earlier stage. In addition, we have increased the range and quality of AP within the borough.
- We have worked collaboratively with parents, carers, children, young people and stakeholders to develop pathways to provide early identification and support, which are embedded as part of our schools graduated response. Our speech and language pathway, developed as part of the Stockton-on-Tees Talks Programme, has provided early intervention which has reduced or closed the gap for 500 children in the early years identified with gaps in their language development.
- We have committed to the implementation of the I-Thrive Framework for system change, as an integrated, person centred, and needs led approach to delivering mental health services for children, young people and families. Early mental health support is through dedicated mental health support teams in schools which currently provide evidence-based interventions into 40 settings and have resulted in children receiving mental health support much earlier without lengthy waits and with improved mental health outcomes.
- We have produced an inclusive education framework (mainstream practice) which details the minimum expectations for what should be ordinarily available to support children with additional needs in schools and settings from early years through to post 16.

The local area partnership was clear that there was more to do to ensure that outcomes improve in the context of also addressing demand and financial pressures across the system. This intelligence and information had been used to inform the strategic direction as a local area partnership and had fed through into the priorities and commitments of the SEND and AP Strategy.

During 2025 strategy priorities and commitments had been co-developed with the Stockton youth forum and over one hundred children and young people, The Stockton parent carer forum alongside parents and carers and key partners including education settings, health, and care professionals. This collaborative process involved a

comprehensive range of consultation activity including stakeholder meetings, surveys, face to face engagement and SEND focused events across the borough to develop the strategy priorities and commitments.

Four priorities guide the strategy which were based on key outcomes that support preparation for adulthood:

- Being as healthy as possible.
- Building relationships with friends, family, and the community.
- Developing independence.
- Accessing quality education, training, and employment opportunities.

Each priority had a set of partnership commitments that had been developed directly from consultation and collaboration across the local area partnership.

The draft strategy had been out for public consultation during July – September. Information gathered from public consultation had informed which commitments were prioritised during the first year of the strategy. An annual action plan would be led by the multiagency SEND Operational group, detailing how the local partnership would deliver on the commitments, including key milestones and measures that would track the impact being made. Scrutiny and oversight of progress against the plan would be provided through the SEND Strategic Group.

RESOLVED that the SEND and AP strategy for the local area be approved.

CAB/57/25 Strategy for Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council Outdoor Play Provision 2025 (Part 2)

Consideration was given to a report on the Strategy for Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council Outdoor Play Provision 2025 Part 2.

Following approval of the recommendations contained within the initial report to Cabinet on the 17th July 2025, officers had enacted the agreed principles against the play estate and completed the final sections of the Strategy.

The resulting information contained in Section 7 of the Strategy (pages 21 to 30) are the officers' recommendations for specific Council-owned play areas, utilising the data collected during the investigation phase of strategy development whilst understanding Cabinet's recommendation to allocate a further £150k in next year's MTFP.

This would result in a decreased play estate, which is sustainable and ensured a fair distribution of sites across the Borough when viewed in conjunction with play areas provided by third-parties such as parish/town councils and housing developers.

The Strategy also recommended a series of cross-cutting actions regarding the development, design and management of play provision. These are set out in Section 8 of the Strategy.

Cabinet was reminded that the Council's approach to the management and development of outdoor play provision owned by Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council is to:

- Maintain a range of good quality play areas and informal sport facilities

- Achieve a fair and equitable distribution of outdoor play provision across the Borough
- Deliver welcoming, accessible and inclusive play spaces, while acknowledging that not all sites can cater for all needs and abilities
- Ensure the overall scale of provision is at a level which is sustainable in terms of Council resource.

The Borough had 57 play areas which were available for the public to use free of charge at all reasonable times:

- 40 are owned and managed by Stockton Borough Council,
- 9 are owned by town / parish councils but managed by the Borough Council,
- 8 are owned and managed by housing developers / management companies.

There were plans for a further 12 play areas to be delivered over the next few years (3 to be provided by the Council and 9 to be provided by housing developers) although this was subject to change.

If approved this strategy would result in a total of 32 Council-owned sites, with 11 scheduled for phased decommissioning with the resulting land identified for alternative public use. This provision was complemented by the 17 play areas already provided by third parties and the additional 9 which were planned as part of new housing developments.

RESOLVED that:-

1. The Strategy for Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council Outdoor Play Provision 2025 be approved.
2. The site-specific recommendations, subject to financial approvals of the additional £150,000 pa contained within the 2026/27 MTFP report to be presented in February 2026 be approved. This would enable 23 Council-owned play areas to be prioritised for retention, development or redevelopment, ensuring high maintenance standards and delivering good play value. A further 9 play areas will also be retained subject to availability of resources, while 11 sites would be subject to phased decommissioning and repurposing.
3. The series of additional cross-cutting actions relating to the development, design and management of play provision be noted.

CAB/58/25 Minutes of Various Bodies

In accordance with the Council's Constitution or previous practice the minutes of the meeting of the bodies indicated below were submitted for consideration:-

TVCA AGM – 27 June 2025
 TVCA Cabinet – 27 June 2025
 TVCA Cabinet – 25 July 2025
 SSP – 23 July 2025

RESOLVED that That the minutes of the meetings detailed in the appendices be noted.