

REPORT TO CABINET

9 FEBRUARY 2026

REPORT OF CORPORATE  
MANAGEMENT TEAM

## KEY DECISION

Children and Young People - Lead Cabinet Member – Councillor Clare Besford

# A Children's Integrated Front Door for Stockton-on-Tees (Update)

### Summary

This report provides an update on the disaggregation of the joint Children's Hub with Hartlepool Borough Council and the development of a new Integrated Early Help and Safeguarding Front Door for Stockton-on-Tees. Rising demand, evolving national Families First reforms, and the need for a more locally responsive service have driven the decision to bring the front door inhouse from April 2026. The proposed model will create a single access point for early help and safeguarding, supported by multiagency triage, digital tools, and alignment with Family Hubs. The report outlines progress to date, implications for workforce, finance, and partnership working, and requests Cabinet approval to formally withdraw delegated authority from Hartlepool to enable the transition.

### Reasons for Decision

The Children's Hub serves as the primary point of contact for anyone with concerns about the safety or wellbeing of a child or young person living in Stockton-on-Tees. The Hub is currently delivered in partnership with, and managed by, Hartlepool Borough Council.

This report asks members to note the update regarding the disaggregation of the Children's multi-agency hub, and the commencement of a new service within Stockton-on-Tees. This change will strengthen the Council's commitment to the Powering Our Futures Mission by enhancing service responsiveness for local communities and aligns with the Early Intervention and Prevention work programme.

### Recommendations

1. To approve the establishment of Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council's in-house Integrated Front Door arrangements (Early Help and Safeguarding) to be operational from 1 April 2026, replacing the current shared front door arrangements.

2. To withdraw the Council's delegation/arrangements for Hartlepool Borough Council to discharge the relevant front door functions on its behalf, with effect from 23:59 on 31 March 2026, and to confirm that the Council will resume full responsibility for delivery from 1 April 2026

## Detail

### The Children's Hub

1. The Children's Hub (CHub) serves as the first point of contact for anyone concerned about the safety or wellbeing of a child or young person in Stockton-on-Tees. Since 2016 the CHub has been managed in partnership with Hartlepool Borough Council. The multi-agency front door includes Hartlepool and Stockton local authorities, Cleveland Police, a Local Authority Designated Officer, and representatives from 0-19 services delivered by Harrogate District Foundation Trust.
2. The operational context of the CHub has evolved significantly since its inception. The service has experienced a substantial increase in demand, with Stockton referrals surpassing national and regional averages. Economic pressures, the cost-of-living crisis, and the consequences of COVID-19 have also contributed to the growing complexity of needs of people referred to the hub.
3. Separating from the integrated front door to an in-house offer aligns more closely with national reforms and the strategic direction of the Council. This transition supports the national policy direction to transform children's social care by improving outcomes, keeping families together, and enhancing localised service delivery. It ensures that the CHub can better reflect local needs, partnership arrangements, and Stockton-on-Tees specific strategies for reform.
4. The decision to disaggregate the joint front door was previously agreed by cabinet (June 2025), and this has meant that both SBC and HBC have been designing the future model for their independent front doors. Stockton has followed the Transformation Programmes governance framework, and has used a thorough options appraisal, incorporating the analysis of demand data on the current service, to identify the staffing requirements for the structure of the new Stockton Integrated Front Door (IFD)

### Options Appraisal

5. A comprehensive options appraisal was undertaken with input from a range of support services to ensure all decisions were lawful, feasible, affordable, and aligned with corporate and public expectations. Following this process, an 'Early Help Integrated Front Door' was identified as the preferred approach because it best meets statutory safeguarding duties while offering the strongest alignment with national reform priorities, local accountability, and improved outcomes through early intervention.
6. Although complex to implement in the short term, this model provides enhanced support for children, families, and partners, promotes financial transparency and resource efficiency, and strengthens partnership working and demand management. It represents the most suitable solution for delivering long-term improvements.

## Scrutiny

7. The recent People Select Committee review highlighted the need to keep Early Help at the heart of the new children’s front door. Members looked at evidence from partners and officers and stressed that the redesigned front door should make it easier for families to get the right support early, rather than defaulting to statutory services, this supports the findings for the future direction of the front door.
8. The Committee also recommended creating clear advice and training for schools and other partners who refer to the Children’s Hub. This will help ensure families who would benefit most from Early Help are directed to those services, reducing unnecessary referrals to social care. These recommendations will be built into the implementation planning, and ongoing development of the new front door, as they are essential for managing demand and improving outcomes.

## Stockton’s Integrated Front Door

9. Collaboratively Stockton’s Front Door is a new way for families to access help and support. The recommended approach is to create an Integrated Early Help and Safeguarding Front Door. This model responds to rising demand, unmet needs, and pressures identified through a rapid needs assessment and performance analysis. It brings early help and safeguarding together in one place, so families can get timely and joined-up support.
10. The new approach moves away from a system focused mainly on safeguarding to one that also includes early help and family support. This will provide a more complete response to challenges and opportunities in the current system. It also offers digital and face-to-face help before families reach the front door, making it easier to access advice and guidance without entering Statutory Children’s services.

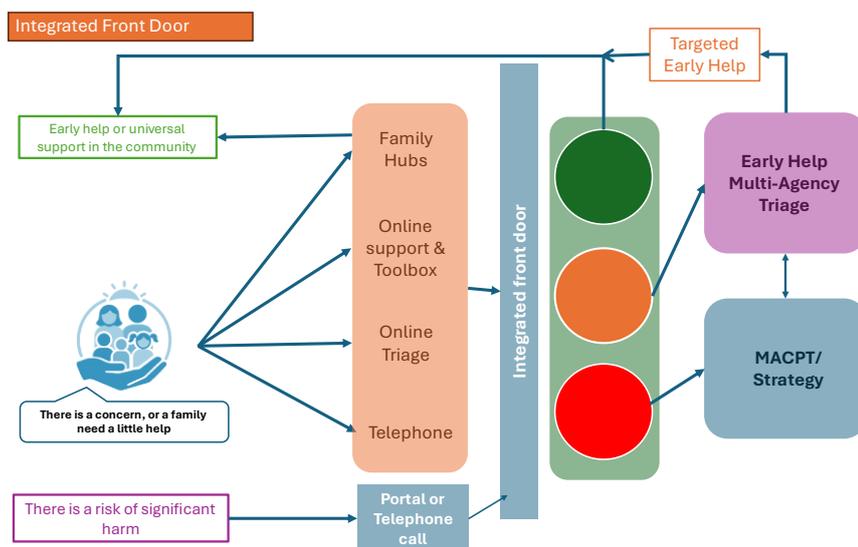


Figure 1 Integrated Front Door (MACPT: Multi-Agency Child Protection Team)

11. The proposed model includes:

- A **single access point** for both safeguarding and early help concerns.
- A **multi-agency triage process** to ensure appropriate and timely responses.
- Integration with **Family Hubs**, digital self-help tools, and community-based support.

### Families First Reforms and the Front Door

12. In March 2025, the government published guidance to support the rollout of the Families First Partnership (FFP) reforms. These reforms introduce significant changes across children's services. From early help to safeguarding, designed to meet the needs of local communities. As a result, the design and operation of the Integrated Front Door (IFD) have been developed within this wider context.

13. Work on the broader FFP reforms is ongoing within SBC Children's Services. Dedicated working groups are exploring options for redesigning services in line with Department for Education guidance, which reinforces the importance of an early help approach to provide timely, appropriate support and prevent issues from escalating. These groups are closely aligned with the development of the IFD to ensure the new model creates a strong foundation for delivering services consistent with the FFP vision.

### Implications of the change

14. The transition to an Integrated Early Help and Safeguarding Front Door represents a significant organisational shift with several implications. Firstly, recruitment and workforce planning are critical to ensure the new model is fully staffed and equipped to deliver a seamless service from April 2026. This includes creating new roles aligned with early help priorities and safeguarding requirements. Secondly, compensation costs will arise as part of the disaggregation from Hartlepool Borough Council due to costs associated with workforce changes. In addition, the development of new processes and technology is essential to support a single access point, multi-agency triage, and integration with Family Hubs and digital tools.

15. While these changes require substantial effort within tight timescales, they offer clear benefits: improved responsiveness, earlier intervention for families, and stronger alignment with national reforms. Delivering this transformation on schedule is a priority to ensure Stockton's front door reflects local needs and provides a more holistic, preventative approach to supporting children and families.

### Engagement with Partners

16. A range of partners both statutory and non-statutory have been engaged with the process of developing the design and approach to the Children's Front Door. The approach was endorsed by the Families First Partnership Board September 2025. Partners will continue to be engaged in the development of the front door, and the multi-agency response.

## Community Impact and Equality and Poverty Impact Assessment

17. An Equality Poverty Impact Assessment has been completed and was approved December 2025. impacts have been noted:
- More families, especially in disadvantaged areas, will receive timely support before issues escalate, with the potential to receive support closer to home with the alignment of 'Family Help'.
  - Services will be shaped around Stockton's diverse community needs, improving cultural relevance and responsiveness.
  - Technology will enhance access, provided it's designed to be inclusive and user-friendly. To avoid digital exclusion, the offer of support via telephone and family hubs still widens access to families and residents.
  - Stronger collaboration across sectors will ensure holistic support for families facing complex challenges

## Corporate Parenting Implications

18. Whilst the Integrated Front Door is intended to support all children who may be at risk of harm, the decision to bring this service in-house supports the Council in delivering its corporate parenting responsibilities. A more integrated and locally managed approach will strengthen the Council's ability to identify and respond rapidly to safeguarding concerns for the children in our care and care experienced young people. Improved coordination across local services will help ensure that the needs of our most vulnerable children are prioritised, reinforcing the Council's commitment to its role as a corporate parent within the wider safeguarding system.

## Financial Implications

19. The Council currently meets the cost of the shared front door arrangements through payments to Hartlepool Borough Council, which are invoiced/recharged to Stockton. The budget for these services is £860,000 and is therefore already held within the Council's Children's Services budget.
20. From 1 April 2026, the Council will retain this existing budget provision and will apply it directly to fund the operation of the Council's in-house Integrated Front Door arrangements, replacing the current arrangement with Hartlepool Borough Council. The proposed service model has been costed based on the proposed staffing structure and anticipated operating requirements.
21. The Council may also be required to meet reasonable disaggregation/exit costs associated with the cessation of the shared arrangements with Hartlepool Borough Council. Any such costs will be managed within the Children's Services budget and will be subject to approval in accordance with the Council's financial governance arrangements. Any emerging cost pressures that cannot be contained within existing budgets will be reported through established financial reporting and decision making processes.

## Legal Implications

22. The Council has statutory duties in relation to children's safeguarding and early help, including the requirement for multi-agency arrangements at the "front door".
  - Children Act 1989
  - Children Act 2004
  - Children and Social Work Act 2017
  - Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023
23. Since 2016, elements of the Council's front door arrangements have operated through a shared service / delegated arrangement with Hartlepool Borough Council, under powers including section 101 of the Local Government Act 1972, section 9EA of the Local Government Act 2000, and the Local Authorities (Arrangements for the Discharge of Functions) (England) Regulations 2012.
24. The Council remains accountable for ensuring that its statutory duties are effectively discharged, including during the transition period.
25. For the disaggregation of the shared service to be completed, Cabinet is requested to formally withdraw the delegation/arrangements for Hartlepool Borough Council to discharge the relevant functions on the Council's behalf, so that the Council resumes full responsibility for delivery from 1 April 2026.
26. The withdrawal of the shared arrangements will be implemented through the revocation of the relevant delegation agreement(s) and associated governance arrangements.

## Risk Assessment

27. There are risks associated with implementing this change, in particular the need to maintain capacity, resilience and consistent decision-making at the "front door" during the transition period. As safeguarding and early help are statutory functions, it is essential that there is no disruption to triage, screening, referrals and escalation pathways as Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council moves from the current shared arrangements to an in-house Integrated Front Door from 1 April 2026.
28. Transitional continuity arrangements will therefore be developed and implemented, including clear operational governance and escalation arrangements, to ensure a safe and seamless changeover. These risks will be managed through the programme approach, including workforce planning, partner engagement and mobilisation oversight.

## 29. Organisational Risks

- **Change Management:** The transition to an in-house Integrated Front Door may face resistance from staff accustomed to the current model. There are also requirements for recruitment and physical space to accommodate staff.

Mitigation: Implement comprehensive change management strategies, including training and support workforce and asset and facilities planning.

- **Operational Disruption:** The disaggregation process could disrupt service delivery and OFSTED implications will need to be considered. Mitigation: Develop a detailed transition plan with clear timelines and contingency measures including planning and considering OFSTED requirements throughout planning.

### 30. Reputational Risks

- **Public Perception:** Changes in service delivery might be perceived negatively by the public. Mitigation: Communicate transparently with stakeholders and the community about the benefits and reasons for the change.
- **Partner Relationships:** The separation from Hartlepool Borough Council could strain relationships with existing partners. Mitigation: Maintain open lines of communication and involve partners in the transition process.

### 31. Financial Risks

- **Cost of Transition:** The disaggregation process may incur additional costs. Mitigation: A staffing and operational model fully costed based on needs has been completed as part of the design
- **Resource Allocation:** Ensuring adequate resources for the new in-house model could be challenging. Mitigation: Plan and budget carefully, prioritising essential services and staffing needs.

### 32. Service User Risks

- **Service Continuity:** There is a risk of service disruption affecting children and families. Mitigation: Ensure a seamless transition with minimal impact on service users by maintaining robust interim arrangements.
- **Quality of Service:** The quality of service might be compromised during the transition. Mitigation: Monitor service quality closely and address any issues promptly.

### 33. Political Risks

- **Policy Alignment:** The changes must align with national and local policies. Mitigation: Regularly review and adjust plans to ensure compliance with policy directives.
- **Stakeholder Support:** Gaining and maintaining political support for the changes is crucial. Mitigation: Engage with political stakeholders early and often to secure their backing.

## WARDS AFFECTED AND CONSULTATION WITH WARD/COUNCILLORS

34. The Integrated Front Door is a service available for all children and families who need additional support within the Borough and is therefore a Borough wide offer.

## Background Papers

1. [EPIA - Final](#)

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