

**REPORT TO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE
SELECT COMMITTEE
15 APRIL 2026
REPORT OF DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

Children and Young People Overview Report

Summary

This report gives an overview of the key achievements and challenges in 2025/2026 for Children's Social Care

Key Achievements

1. Focused Visit- ILACS

Since the 2023 inspection, when help and protection were judged to require improvement, the quality and impact of social work practice in this area have strengthened

Leadership stability and oversight which is starting to show impact. Recognised by Ofsted in the Focused Visit (December 2025).

Accurate self-assessment supported by improved quality assurance reporting.

Agency staff converting to permanent positions and positive feedback from staff.

Improved senior manager grip through panels and increased oversight.

Improved performance on key indicators.

2. Launch of Integrated Front Door- Family Help Point-1 April 2026

Partners have collaborated effectively in the development of the new integrated Front Door, with joint working woven into the future operating model to support timely information-sharing and confident, well-informed decision-making.

Strengthening partnership arrangements within the new integrated Front Door remains a clear strategic priority. Embedding domestic abuse services, substance misuse specialists and statutory safeguarding partners within the daily triage process

will improve the quality and pace of joint decision-making, enabling earlier, more coordinated support for children and families. This integrated approach will also build capacity and confidence across the wider system by ensuring partners contribute directly to threshold decisions and assessment processes. Over time, this is expected to reduce unnecessary escalation to statutory intervention and support more sustainable demand management

3. Preparedness for Children Social Care Reforms- Family Help/ MACPT/FGDM

The Council has continued to make strong progress in preparing for the implementation of the Families First Partnership (FFP) reforms. Our Delivery Plan has been reviewed and endorsed by the Department for Education, who have highlighted the clarity of our approach and the strength of our partnership arrangements. Their feedback confirms that we are on track and well positioned to embed the reforms effectively, ensuring that the new requirements are implemented in a way that strengthens local support for children, young people and families.

There is strong multi-agency commitment to FFP, with active contributions and secondees from key partners including Cleveland Police and Harrogate and District NHS Foundation Trust. This collective investment is already influencing the design of new multi-agency delivery models and strengthening shared ownership of early-help pathways

4. Increasing workforce stability

There has been significant investment in the Learning Academy, which oversees all aspects of learning and development across Children's Services. The Learning Academy supports the growth and development of students, practitioners, and managers across all service areas. The Academy reflects our commitment to building a confident, skilled, and resilient workforce, capable of delivering high-quality, child-centred practice.

The student and apprenticeship programme has been refreshed as has the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) programme. This has ensured that there is a robust offer for those who are commencing the career within Stockton Borough Council.

A new practice model, Systemic Practice was launched in 2025 with the aim of ensuring that we have a strong relational model to support practitioners when supporting children and families. To support this, our Learning Academy has aligned all internal training with systemic principles, ensuring coherence and depth across our development offer. Trainers are being equipped to deliver through a systemic lens, reinforcing the model in everyday practice.

A 'back to basics' approach to practice has commenced is focused on reaffirming the foundations of good social work practice, ensuring consistency, clarity, and a strong focus on child centred interventions. The training offer provides a comprehensive continuing professional development programme for both practitioners and managers across Social Care. An enhanced advanced training pathway is also now available for experienced practitioners to further deepen their skills and knowledge.

Workforce stability is a key enabler of high-quality, consistent social work practice. We continue to 'grow our own', expanding social work apprenticeships, investing in student placements and Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs). We have strengthened our relationships with local Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to ensure that we have a steady flow of students. In 2025, 90% of final year students completing placements secured permanent roles with us. This has contributed to an increase in NQSWs, with 12% of our permanent workforce currently in their ASYE year. To maintain service capacity and quality, we have retained a small number of experienced agency workers to support and mentor newer staff. As of February, 91% of our social workers are permanent, with 9% employed via agency arrangements.

Challenges

1. Increase in complexity of need

In the past year, children in care numbers have risen by 9%. As of 31 March 2026, there are 615 children in our care. In 2025, 175 children and young people started in our care – compared to 67 in 2024 and 54 in 2023. The profile of children requiring care shows that children have increasingly complex needs that put pressure on families and children. Older children entering care where there are serious safeguarding concerns relating to criminal exploitation, and children with a range of complexity relating to speech and language needs, neurodiversity and trauma related needs. We also see high numbers of babies needing care due to complex family histories including domestic abuse, neglect and parental substance misuse.

The criteria for the disabled children team have broadened and has resulted in an increase in children with complex needs requiring assessment and ongoing support.

This has led to an increase in requests for direct payments and short breaks services. As result there have been pressures on both the budget and on staffing capacity in the disabled children's team. There has been a temporary increase in staffing to meet this additional demand, and a service review is in progress to ensure children's needs are met appropriately and consistently through improved service arrangements and panel processes.

2. Sufficiency and budget pressures

Sufficiency of local, appropriate and cost-effective care arrangements for children is both a local and national challenge. The number and approval type of in-house fosters does not meet demand. This means more children are living in external independent fostering (IFA) homes, which cost more. Additionally, a national shortage of foster carers means that more children are being placed in external children's residential homes when foster carers cannot be found for them. The cost of external children's homes continues to rise and is placing pressure on the children's services budget. Combined with the increased complexity of children's needs, more specialist homes are often required, such as solo placements, which are significantly more expensive.

Increasing numbers of children entering our care continue to intensify pressure on a placement market already struggling to meet need, particularly for young people with complex or high-risk profiles. Recent workshop intelligence highlights that emergency placements, limited sufficiency in registered homes, and provider reluctance linked to Ofsted outcome risks are collectively driving both cost escalation and reduced placement stability. The sufficiency picture remains constrained, with approximately 85 local places overall. Internal capacity is due to become available (including an Edge of Care home, Complex Mental Health homes, and Mulberry Grange), which will partially relieve some pressure but use of unregistered or emergency options remains a systemic risk. Phase 2 Powering our Future transformation activity is progressed that will help shape a more sustainable cost and sufficiency position over the next 12 months.

This evidence underlines the need for strengthened forecasting within our Sufficiency Strategy and Market Position Statement, ensuring that decision-makers and providers can clearly see how increasing demand, market constraints, and regulatory pressures intersect with our service priorities to improve placement stability and sufficiency and reduce the overall number of children in our care.

Emerging Issues

5. 2026/2027- Year of design and test of CSC Reforms

The design and testing of the Borough's response to the Families First Partnership reforms is a key emerging issue. This will include piloting our proposed Family Help model working at 'place' level, enabling us to develop a deeper understanding of how the reforms translate into practice and how families experience support at the earliest stage, prior to full rollout by April 2027. Alongside this, we will pilot a Multi-Agency- Child Protection approach focused on pre-birth and under1s, providing an opportunity to test new ways of working for our most vulnerable children. These pilots will allow us to explore and refine the new Family Help Lead Practitioner and Lead Child Protection Practitioner roles set out in the reforms and to ensure that the model we ultimately adopt is firmly rooted in the needs of families and shaped collaboratively across the wider children's system.

6. Development of the Regional Care Cooperative

The Department for Education's reforms to establish Regional Care Cooperatives (RCCs) and strengthen regional fostering hubs represent a significant shift toward coordinated, end-to-end regional delivery models. RCCs are designed to pool resources, improve forecasting and market-shaping, and move local areas away from fragmented, reactive commissioning toward a more strategic, collaborative approach. This includes progressing toward RCCs acting as single regional customers and, in time, providers for children's homes, secure provision and fostering activity. This work is being taken forward as a regional development across the 12 participating local authorities, reflecting the DfE's expectation that RCCs operate at sufficient scale to achieve system efficiencies and improve sufficiency planning. In parallel, the DfE is investing in redesigned fostering hubs to streamline assessment, approval and ongoing support for foster carers. These hubs will create a clearer and more consistent pathway from first enquiry through to training and post-approval support, with the intention of increasing the number of family-based placements and supporting national ambitions to expand fostering capacity.

7. Youth Justice Modernisation

The Government has set out the most substantial reform of the youth justice system in a generation, focusing on modernising governance, introducing multi-year funding arrangements, strengthening early intervention, and ensuring that custody is used only as a genuine last resort. These changes have significant strategic implications for local authorities, Youth Justice Services (YJSs), and the wider Early Help and safeguarding landscape. As part of this programme, a number of key responsibilities will transfer from the Youth Justice Board to the Ministry of Justice.

Locally, the reforms will drive change in the following areas:

- Increased investment in the Turnaround Programme, expanding early intervention to reduce the number of children entering the criminal justice system for the first time.
- A stronger emphasis on the link between Early Help and Youth Justice, supporting earlier identification and intervention for children with complex or escalating needs.
- Implementation of a knife-possession pathway, ensuring that every child found in possession of an offensive weapon receives a timely assessment and targeted intervention.
- Enhanced focus on victim engagement and support, strengthening the quality and consistency of practice.
- Joint commissioning through the Tees for Remand Partnerships, developing and expanding alternatives to custody.

8. Best Start in Life strategy

A further emerging priority for 2026–27 is the implementation of our Best Start in Life programme, beginning with the launch of our Best Start Plan 2026–2031 and the establishment of Redhill as the first Best Start Family Hub. Redhill Family Hub has been selected as the initial site based on local data and need and will operate using a test and learn approach, with an enhanced focus on the Best Start 0-5 offer while continuing to provide a core element of 0–19 provision. Taking a test and learn approach allows our partnership across Health, Education, Voluntary Sector and SBC services to trial new models of integrated early years support and to refine our approach based on feedback and learning from families. This learning will directly shape the continued development of our borough-wide network of Family Hubs, supporting our drive to improve school readiness, reduce inequalities and give every child in Stockton-on-Tees the best possible start in life. We have been set ambitious targets by the Department for Education for the proportion of children achieving a Good Level of Development (GLD) by the end of reception which are that by the end of the 2027/28 academic year, at least 78.5% of children are expected to achieve a GLD, with a specific target of 63.1% for children eligible for Free School Meals.

Name of Contact Officer: Majella McCarthy

Post Title: Director of Children's Services

Telephone number: 01642 524994

Email address: majella.mccarthy@stockton.gov.uk