

# **Children's Services Committee**

## **Minutes and Decision Record**

29 September 2026

### **Meeting commenced**

**Time:** 4:00pm

**Location:** Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Hartlepool

### **Present:**

Councillor Jim Lindridge (In the Chair)

Councillors Brian Cowie, Martin Dunbar and Phil Holbrook

In accordance with Council Procedure Rule 4.2 Councillor Ronnie Buglass was in attendance as substitute for Councillor Amanda Napper

School Heads Representative: Zoe Westley (Special)

**Officers:** Alison Sutherland, Executive Director of Children's Services

Rebecca Stephenson, Assistant Director (Early Intervention  
Performance and Commissioning)

Fiona Stobbs, Assistant Director (Education, Aspirations and  
Achievement)

Emma Rutherford, Executive Head Teacher – Vulnerable Pupils

Angela Lucas, Principal Democratic Services and Legal Support Officer

Jo Stubbs, Principal Democratic Services and Legal Support Officer

## 15. Apologies for Absence

Councillors Nick Anderson, Brenda Harrison and Amanda Napper. Parish Council Representative Chris Robson. Co-opted Members Gillian Hood and Joanne Wilson. Parent Governor Representative Martin Pout.

## 16. Declarations of Interest

None

## 17. Minutes

Minutes from 30 June 2026 – received.

## 18. Education – Children with a Social Worker (*Executive Director of Children's Services*)

### **Type of decision**

For information.

### **Purpose of Report**

To provide information on the education of children in Hartlepool who have a social worker, including those who are open to Hartlepool Social Care under a Child in Need Plan or those identified as Child Protection.

### **Issue(s) for consideration**

The Executive Headteacher for Vulnerable Pupils gave members a brief overview of the role and remit of the Virtual School. While originally established to support children in care and previously looked after children it had expanded to include oversight of children with a social worker and children in kinship care arrangements. Virtual Heads were expected to:

- Enhance partnerships between educational settings and the local authority
- Identify the needs of the cohort and address barriers to poor educational outcomes
- Offer advice and support to key professionals to help children make progress including social workers, designated teachers and school leaders.

The Executive Teacher for Vulnerable Pupils gave examples of how these critical activities were achieved. These included attendance and input at Hartlepool Inclusion Panel, the strengthening of links with other teams (SEN, Inclusion, Attendance and Admissions), reciprocal sharing of data between the local authority and schools and the provision of drop-in sessions for social

workers to discuss individual children and any other education related concerns.

The report contained data pertaining to attendance, attainment of mental health and wellbeing for children with social workers which demonstrated particularly poor outcomes and evidence of significant gaps between these pupils and their peers. No specific cause was identified but it was likely that these children would have complex family circumstances.

Members discussed the report at length. Based on their queries the Executive Head for Vulnerable Pupils advised as follows:

- Officers would meet to discuss any new vulnerable pupils within 5 days of a referral being made to the Virtual School before pulling a plan together. This speedy response was due to the team having dedicated officers and a psychologist on staff.
- There was a definite link between poor attendance and poor attainment. Those schools with particularly good attendance rates had been asked to provide case studies to assist other schools in improving their rates. However the school attendance team currently have limited capacity.
- The team has a strong relationship with schools and were confident of their support.
- It was anticipated that the remit of the virtual school would officially expand to include Early Help children.
- It was intended that this report be updated annually for Committee.
- So far this year 42 children had opted to be home educated while 26 had returned to mainstream school.

### **Decision**

That the report be noted.

## **19. Any other business which the Chair considers urgent**

### **Appointments Panel**

The Executive Director of Children's Services advised members of the recent permanent appointments of Fiona Stobbs as Assistant Director (Education, Aspirations and Achievement) and Louise Fox as Assistant Director (Children and Families).

### **Regional Memorandum of Understanding**

The Chair read the following statement:

*“The regional MOU was established to reduce competition between councils and support a more stable children’s social care workforce.*

*Against that background, I am concerned that Middlesbrough Council are seeking to appoint 6 agency social workers but propose to do so using the higher Advanced Practitioner agency rate to recruit to lower-graded roles.*

*I acknowledge Middlesbrough’s workforce challenges and am pleased that they have given assurances that they will not accept applications from agency staff currently working within the North-East region and will not proactively approach or seek to recruit permanent staff from other North-East authorities.*

*However, Middlesbrough’s situation and difficulties are not unique and their approach risks undermining both the purpose of the MOU and confidence in the regional approach. I therefore hope that this temporary departure from the MOU will be closely monitored, reviewed promptly and resolved through collective regional working.”*

The Executive Director of Children’s Services advised that the impact on wider recruitment across the region would be monitored and reviewed in 3 months.

The meeting concluded at 4:50pm

**H MARTIN**

**DIRECTOR OF LEGAL, GOVERNANCE AND HUMAN RESOURCES**

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