

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

3 AUGUST 2023

ANNUAL FOSTERING REPORT (2022 – 2023)

Report from: Dr Lee-Anne Farach, Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive

Author: Ingrid Crisan, Head of Service, Provider Services

Summary

The Annual Report sets out how Medway Council Fostering Service meets the needs of the children in care in the year from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023 and establishes the work which should be undertaken in the coming year.

1. Recommendations

1.1. The Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to note the Fostering Service Annual Report 2022-2023.

2. Budget and policy framework

2.1. Medway Fostering Service operates in accordance with the Fostering National Minimum Standards, the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, and the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010. These regulations are the foundation of the regulatory framework for fostering services under the Care Standards Act 2000.

2.2. Medway Council Fostering Service provides safe, regulated foster care placements for children in care and contributes to improving outcomes for the most vulnerable children. The key priority for the service is to ensure that all children who are in the care of Medway Council, whether the arrangement is short or long term are cared for in loving, secure and stable families.

2.3. The Fostering Regulations 25.7 requires the senior managers of the Local Authority to receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial position of the fostering service.

2.4. This report is consistent with national policy, legislation and guidance. It is linked to key local planning documents, in particular the Medway Council Sufficiency Strategy and the Council Plan priority that Children and Young People have the best start in life in Medway.

3. Background

- 3.1. The Annual Report is for a wide audience of stakeholders including Elected Members, service users, staff, and partner agencies.
- 3.2. The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of the business and operations of Medway Fostering Service during the financial year 2022-2023. It includes relevant data on the service's performance and activities, as well as updates on the functioning and progress of the Fostering Panel. Additionally, the report outlines the developments that have taken place in the Service throughout the year, as well as any planned initiatives for the upcoming 2023/2024 period.

4. Options

- 4.1. To note the annual report.

5. Advice and analysis

- 5.1. The key objectives for the Fostering Service are to ensure:
 - there is a choice of high-quality foster homes available to meet the complex and diverse needs of children.
 - foster homes support the child's permanency plan and promote the child's physical, social, emotional and intellectual development by providing each child with the opportunity of developing their full potential, through health care, education and leisure activities that will enhance their life chance.
 - equality of opportunity by having a positive regard for the child's racial, religious, linguistic, cultural and gender identity needs.
 - the individual child's needs/wishes and feelings are paramount and are taken into consideration in relation to where they live and who cares for them.
 - best practice that is compliant with Fostering Services Regulations 2011, as amended by The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review and Fostering Services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013, National Minimum Standards and the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010.
 - delivery of regular supervision to each foster carer from a supervising social worker who will assist in identifying the individual training and development needs of foster carers, so that the service continually develops the fostering workforce.
 - that foster carers feel valued by providing regular updates on the service; building the Medway foster carer community, consulting regularly and learning from those who are in receipt of services.

- service performance is monitored, assessed with outcomes measured via a quality assurance framework.
- it continues to innovate and develop the service in consultation with children in care and foster carers through groups, workstreams and carer-to-carer training.

5.2. The Fostering Service

- 5.2.1. The structure of the Fostering Service (available in Appendix 1) has remained the same since the last annual report. The Fostering Service consists of four teams: the Recruitment and Assessment Team, two Generic Fostering Teams and one Connected Carers and Post Special Guardianship Team. The service is overseen by the Service Manager who acts as the Registered Manager for the Fostering Service.
- 5.2.2. All teams have seen significant changes in staffing between April 2022 and March 2023. The Recruitment Team lost all the permanent staff members (one Team Manager and three social workers). They have been slowly replaced by a fresh team of permanently employed social workers and a Team Manager.
- 5.2.3. The two Generic Fostering Teams and the Connected Carers and Post Special Guardianship Team have also seen significant changes with the loss of three senior practitioners across the three teams and several social work positions. There is ongoing recruitment activity to fill the positions on an ongoing basis.
- 5.2.4. An Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) for Fostering conducts all the annual reviews of foster carers, ensuring impartiality and providing a safeguarding mechanism for both the child and the carer. The Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer also completes Standards of Care Review meetings, where concerns have been identified regarding carers. This allows a level of independence from the Fostering Service, and the officer will then take these to Fostering Panel where appropriate for fuller discussion and recommendations on continued approval.
- 5.2.5. The Head of Service for Provider Services acts as the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) for the Fostering Service. The ADM, upon reviewing the recommendation of the Fostering Panel decides whether applicants should be approved as foster carers or not. The ADM also has the responsibility of determining the continued suitability of foster carers following completion of annual reviews of foster carers and recommendation from the Fostering Panel.

5.3. Recruitment and Assessment Team

- 5.3.1. There is one Recruitment and Assessment Team Manager overseeing a Marketing and Recruitment Officer, one Senior Practitioner and three Social

Workers. The Recruitment and Assessment Team is responsible for the recruitment and assessment of foster carers and Supported Lodgings Providers as well as assessing and overseeing Private Fostering Arrangements in Medway.

5.3.2. The Fostering Service has a recruitment sufficiency strategy which utilises current data regarding the gaps in resource provision. Currently, more places are needed for adolescents, children with disabilities, sibling groups and parent and child placements.

5.3.3. The primary objective of the recruitment strategy is to ensure that the service recruits foster carers that can effectively meet the needs of children in care. The services aims to:

- increase the number of in-house foster carers in Medway reducing the reliance on independent fostering agencies (IFAs).
- increase recruitment of foster carers from diverse backgrounds.
- ensure the support offer for foster carers is competitive and attracts the right carers into the Medway Fostering service.
- expand the specialist fostering provision including the Hubs and Parent and Child carers.

5.4. Advertising activity

5.4.1. The need for foster carers nationally is extremely high. Foster carer recruitment is very competitive across the country and Medway Council is no exception. The fostering market is highly competitive; a high number of Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) are located in Medway, and actively advertise for foster carers locally, as do a number of local authorities, in the nearby vicinity.

5.4.2. Medway Fostering Services advertises for foster carers using a combination of public relation activities, social and digital advertising, and partnership building with third parties to promote the service to the public. To achieve these objectives, the Fostering Service engages in “business as usual” activities, supplemented by bursts of activity campaigns.

5.4.3. “Business as usual” means Medway Fostering has a continuous digital presence to nurture interest throughout the year and position the unique selling points of fostering for Medway.

5.4.4. As part of “business as usual” activities Medway Fostering used pay per click advertising (PPC) using google AdWords to capture more of those who are actively searching to become a foster carer in the area. Performing a Google search is a common way for prospective carers to get information and it is estimated that in most searches 40% of people will click on one of the top three paid for ads.

- 5.4.5. During 2022-2023, the service worked to increase the number of followers on Medway Fostering's Facebook page. By growing a larger audience, the service will have more people who will see the posts organically (i.e. 100 followers/5 people see the posts; 1,000 followers/50 people see the posts.) These users have grown in familiarity and engagement with the Medway Fostering brand since March 2021. In March 2020, the page was at 1200 followers, it grew by May 2021 to 1,332 followers, and in May 2023 the page has 1,617 followers. That means the page has 1,617 Facebook users seeing the posts that the page puts out, presenting an excellent bank of information about Fostering. This campaign runs all year targeting Facebook users in Medway/Swale and beyond who are likely to have an interest in Medway Fostering's services, and prompt them to like/follow the page.
- 5.4.6. During 2022-2023 the Fostering website and supporting social media has been the main source of enquiries. The new Fostering website has surpassed the enquiries seen owing to: Kent Media promotions and radio adverts redirecting to specific web pages, internal redirection to Medway Fostering resources, targeted social media posts featuring key URLs and Medway matters adverts. In 2022- 2023 the Fostering Service launched two new landing pages one regarding the fees and allowances and one on the Fostering process infographic interactive.
- 5.4.7. Throughout 2022-2023, 30% of the marketing budget was spend on print advertising for Medway Matters. 15% of enquiries received quoted Medway Matters as a source.
- 5.4.8. The service developed a new brand identity for Medway Council Fostering with distinct brand colours and these are used across all materials to help give a consistent look and feel to marketing and help ensure the advertising is recognisable. During 2022-2023, the service created newly branded promotional merchandise and an exhibition unit for use at external exhibit events. The branded promotional items such as bags and water bottles were shared with people who attend fostering information events, Skills to Foster and to existing foster carers that can be used to spread the message locally.
- 5.4.9. The Fostering Service supplemented the "business as usual" activities by launching three annual recruitment campaigns to support Medway to attract potential foster carers throughout the year. This approach can help to maintain a steady flow of applicants and increase the chances of finding suitable candidates. In 2022-2023 Medway Fostering joined the national Foster Care Fortnight campaign in May 2022, the Sons and Daughters month in October 2022 and the Football World Cup challenge in November 2022.

5.5. Recruitment activity

- 5.5.1. The Fostering in England 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022 report published by Ofsted in November 2022 highlights the decreased capacity of available fostering households nationally since 2018. Since 2018 the number of approved households has declined by 4% and the number of places by 5%. While the number of filled places has remained static, the number of vacant

places has decreased by 23%, reflecting the increasing numbers of children in the care system.

- 5.5.2. The number of applications for mainstream fostering has fallen over the last 5 years and in both local authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) a high percentage of enquiries do not translate into applications. IFAs report a ratio of 23 initial enquiries per application and Local Authorities report a ratio of 8. However, IFAs received 78% of the initial enquiries in 2022. Only 6% of those making initial enquiries went on to make an application compared to 9% in 2018.
- 5.5.3. Between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023, Medway's service received 125 enquiries, completed 24 home visits, and 21 applications were accepted, which equates to a conversion rate of 16.8%.
- 5.5.4. Three home visits that did not result in applications were due to an applicant disengaging from the process, one applicant deciding to withdraw to pursue adult education and driving lessons and one applicant decided they were not ready to proceed.
- 5.5.5. After completing the application 11 applicants withdrew from the fostering process for a variety of reasons. Each applicant's decision to withdraw was influenced by their unique situation and considerations.
- 5.5.6. Between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023, Medway Fostering Service approved 10 generic fostering households. Upon approval, each newly approved carer is assigned a senior practitioner as their supervising social worker and are allocated an experienced foster carer as a buddy, who also offers guidance throughout their fostering journey.
- 5.5.7. The Recruitment Team assesses supported lodgings providers and makes recommendations to the Agency Decision Maker regarding their approval. Supported lodgings providers offer young people aged 16 to 24 a safe family environment to call home whilst developing their independent living skills. Supported lodgings providers offer significant practical and emotional support to the young people when required and to young people towards independence by assisting with budgeting, cooking, etc.
- 5.5.8. Between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023 the service received 16 expressions of interest from applicants to be assessed to be supported lodgings providers with two applications progressing to full approval.
- 5.5.9. The other 14 applicants did not progress to approval due to a variety of reasons such as applicants' personal circumstances (e.g. moving homes, job changes), concerns raised during the assessment process, living outside of the borough, and a general feeling that it was not the appropriate time to pursue approval as supported lodgings providers.
- 5.5.10. Between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023, the service delivered three skills to foster courses for new applicants: one in August 2022 with eight applicants from five households; one in September 2022 with seven applicants from four

households, and one in January 2023, with nine applicants from five households.

5.6. Fostering Panel

5.6.1. In line with regulations, the service operates a Fostering Panel chaired by a skilled, independent, and experienced chair. The work of the Fostering Panel is supported by the Panel Adviser.

5.6.2. The functions of the Fostering Panel are set out in the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the Children Act Guidance Volume 4 Fostering Services 2011. The Fostering Panel has responsibility for making recommendations to the ADM regarding the approval of foster carers and the numbers and ages of children for whom they should be approved, approval of connected carers, changes of approval, consideration of standards of care concerns and oversight of the foster carers' first reviews and any subsequent reviews that may need Panel's consideration. The Panel also has a role in permanence planning where long-term fostering is considered the best option and the child is matched with their permanent foster carers.

5.6.3. Fostering Panels are generally held twice a month. Since the beginning of the lockdown in March 2019, the panel has been held virtually on Microsoft Teams and has become paperless. Information is shared securely using Teams, and panel members are given access to it via their own extranet email address. Feedback from panel members, fostering team staff, and business support indicates a preference for virtual panels as they save a significant amount of time and expense (such as car parking and fuel). Most foster carers have also expressed a preference for virtual panels, finding them less intimidating and easier to attend around childcare and school runs.

5.6.4. Between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023, the Fostering Panel met 23 times. During this time the panel had one new panel member join and received no resignations. One member stepped down as Vice Chair but remained an independent panel member.

5.6.5. Summary of Panel business, between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023:

Form F (Approval of foster carers)	10
Form C (Full approval of connected carers as foster carers for specific child)	10
Change of Approval for foster carers	7
Permanent Match of child to carers	11
Standards of Care (concerns regarding care given to a child)	4
Changes of approval of foster carer	7

Annual Review (first or supplementary report)	9
Termination of Approval	39
Extension of Temporary Approval of connected carer	21
Exemption (IFA)	0
Approval Review	0

Table 1 - Summary of Panel business, between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023

5.6.6. During April 2022 – March 2023, Medway Fostering Service lost a total of 39 households, which is lower compared to the previous year when the service had 53 foster carers deregistered and the year before the service recorded 42 de-registrations.

De-registrations

Year	Ceased Fostering to pursue Adoption	Initiated by foster carer	Initiated by Fostering service	Transferred to IFA	Transferred to Local Authority
2021	1	16	25		
2022		22	28	3	0
2023		12	25	1	1

Table 2 – De-registration of carers between 2021 – 2023

5.6.7. From the total of 39 households, 25 were initiated by the Fostering Service and 12 by the carers themselves. Between April 2022 – March 2023, one household transferred to another Local Authority and one to an Independent Fostering Agency.

5.6.8. Table 3 below provides a breakdown of the reasons for de-registration broken down by household. From the 21 (17 temporary + 4 full approval) connected carers that resigned, ten received court orders, such as Special Guardianship Orders and Child Arrangement Orders, one child returned to the care of their parents, while seven arrangements broke down as the carers were unable to provide the necessary care and support for the children. Two connected carers resigned as the children reached 18, and one resigned as the child moved into supported accommodation.

5.6.9. The eight terminations of approval initiated by the Fostering Service were due to standards of care issues. Of the six foster carers who initiated the resignations, four were Early Permanence carers and had dual approval and progressed to adopt the children, and two foster carers retired from fostering.

De-registrations reasons in 2023	Generic foster carers	Connected Carers temporarily approved	Connected Carers fully approved	Grand Total
Initiated by Fostering service	8	16	1	25
Initiated by foster carer	6	1	3	10
Transferred to another Local Authority	1			1
Transferred to IFA	3			3
Grand Total	18	17	4	39

Table 3 – De-registration of foster carers in 2023 by household type

5.6.10. Understanding the reasons behind de-registrations is crucial for evaluating and improving the services and exit interviews are offered to all foster carer who give notice. Between 2022-2023, four exit interviews were completed and the feedback is used to improve the training and support to foster carers.

5.6.11. The service also completed a 'state of the service' questionnaire, and 71 fostering households contributed their views on the training, support and the events that were offered. The feedback from the foster carers is used to improve the service.

5.7. The Connected Carers Team

5.7.1. The Connected Carers Team consist of one team manager, two senior practitioners, one experienced social worker, a newly qualified social worker and a part time experienced social worker.

5.7.2. The Connected Carers team undertakes assessments of prospective family members and friends who come forward as alternative carers when it is not possible for a child to remain in the care of their birth parents. The team undertakes both planned and emergency assessments and conducts training and post order work to support family and friends with the care of the children. The team also holds family events three times a year and runs carer support groups and coffee mornings monthly. Where carers work or are from out of the area the team also provide online training in the evenings.

5.7.3. During April 2022 to March 2023, 152 applications for viability assessment were received a significant increase from the 56 Viability Assessments undertaken in the year 2021-2022, or 87 completed in the year 2020-2021. Out of these:

- 90 applications were approved for viability assessment after undergoing initial screening.

- 20 applications were rejected due to significant concerns highlighted by the initial checks.
- Four assessments were requested by the court to progress directly to Special Guardianship assessments.
- 38 applications were not completed as the applicants no longer wished to progress with the assessment or the assessment highlighted concerns that prevented the application from progressing further. Concerns ranged from financial instability, criminal records, poor health (including mental health), or unsuitable living conditions.

5.7.4. There are times when a child is placed with alternative family carers in emergency situations. These emergency placements are made under Regulation 24 of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010. The recruitment and assessment process differs from that for mainstream foster carers but still requires compliance with the Fostering Regulations 2011.

5.7.5. During the year, 36 temporary approval assessments were completed and presented to the ADM for approval. Of these, 29 families were approved as temporary foster carers for the children, and seven families were not approved due to concerns about their circumstances regarding the suitability of the arrangements.

5.7.6. The approval of connected carers refers to the process of approving carers specifically for a child, when a child has an existing relationship with those carers, and they are willing to provide a stable home for the child. Once approved, connected carers receive ongoing support, guidance, and financial support in line with the fostering regulations. Between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023 the team completed 10 approvals of Connected Carers.

5.7.7. A total of 76 Special Guardianship assessments were requested during the 2022-2023 period. The Special Guardianship Orders allow children to live with family or friends' carers and given the carers the ability to exercise parental responsibility for the children. From the total number of requests 26 assessments had a positive outcome and 12 assessments had a negative outcome. 25 assessments stopped as the applicants withdrew from the assessment process. There are 13 assessments on going and the outcomes will be known at a later stage.

5.7.8. The team plays a critical role in keeping children in local permanent care arrangements and within their extended families, when it is safe to do so. The Connected Carers Team provides ongoing support, advice, guidance, and training to prospective carers, ensuring they possess the necessary skills to care for the child. The team delivers 'Skills to care' training, which aims to ensure that prospective carers have the necessary knowledge and skills to provide high-quality care to support children and young people. The training covers a wide range of topics, including child development, attachment and trauma, behaviour management and family time. The team also deliver PACE (Playfulness, acceptance, curiosity and empathy) parenting training and attachment training sessions.

- 5.7.9. The team held six 'Skills to Care' training events during the 2022-2023 year, and more are planned for the coming year due to the increasing number of Special Guardianship applications. The service recognises the importance of ongoing training and development to prevent placement breakdowns.
- 5.7.10. Post order support is crucial in supporting carers to provide care to the children and promote stability. The team has taken an active approach to support and promote the well-being of Special Guardians and children under their care by organising four events over the past year. The summer activity event was very well attended and received positive feedback and the request for other activities led to three further activities taking place in October 2022, December 2022 and February 2023. The team's continued efforts to organise these events not only benefit the Special Guardians and children directly involved but also contribute to building a stronger and more supportive Special Guardianship community.
- 5.7.11. From December 2022, the team held a regular coffee morning event on the first Wednesday of the month, to maintain consistency and a strong presence within the Special Guardianship community. This initiative aims to establish stronger relationships and promote communication between the team and the special guardians. The team also run a bi-monthly support group where they deliver a range of topics or have guest speakers, these have included a parenting practitioner and two psychologists.
- 5.7.12. Post order support can also include workers undertaking specific assessments of need with families and targeted work to strengthen the arrangement or offer support with post order family time. Workers also make applications to the Adoption Support Fund to support families with therapeutic needs.

5.8. Allegations / Quality of Care / Complaints

- 5.8.1. All allegations and quality of care concerns are fully explored and analysed to ensure all children are safeguarded and concerns are addressed. In total during the year, 18 carers were reported to the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) for consultation. When required the Fostering Service works in partnership with the operational social work teams and the Police to investigate concerns and take action to safeguard the welfare of children.
- 5.8.2. For the period covered by this report, there were four complaints made by foster carers about the Fostering and Children in Care Services. Out of these, two complaints were resolved at Stage One and two were escalated to Stage Two. The Fostering Service also received two complaints made by prospective special guardians, with one complaint received about a delay in starting the assessment and one about the outcome of the financial assessment.
- 5.8.3. During this period, no compliments regarding the fostering service were sent to the Customer Relations Team. However, it is important to highlight that the service received numerous positive comments from foster carers during the annual reviews and after various activities were organised for carers.

Additionally, the Fostering Panel complimented several practitioners for the quality of the reports that were presented for approval.

5.9. Placement and carer information

5.9.1. All referrals for placements are considered by both in-house Fostering and by the Access to Resources Team who look at potential placements with independent fostering agencies. Matching is key in any decision and the service matches foster carers who have the relevant skills and expertise to meet the needs of individual children.

5.9.2. Of all the children who were new entries to care during the last year, 42 children were placed with Medway foster carers. Of these, 18 children left and 24 remain with in-house foster carers. This is a reduction in the number of children placed over recent years from 50 in the previous year and 62 in 2020-2021, and reflects the reduction in numbers of in-house carers due to resignations and de-registrations.

5.9.3. On 31 March 2023, 166 children in care lived with in house foster carers or connected carers, while 188 lived with IFA foster carers.

5.9.4. The below table gives the breakdown of the numbers and percentages of children of different ages, gender, and ethnicity in care on a particular day, namely on 31 March 2023. The percentages recorded reflect the percentage of the children against the cohort of children in foster placements.

Placements on 31 March 2023		Connected car e	In-house foste r care	Connected care (% of children fostere d)	In-house foster care (% of children fostere d)
Age	Age 0	3	6	1.8%	3.6%
	Aged 1- 4	8	18	4.8%	10.8%
	Aged 5 - 9	4	27	2.4%	16.3%
	Aged 10-15	15	62	9.0%	37.3%
	Aged 16-17	2	21	1.2%	12.7%
		0	3	0.0%	100.0%
Gender	Female	15	57	9.0%	34.3%
	Male	17	77	10.2%	46.4%

Child with a disability		1	10	0.6%	6.0%
Ethnicity	White	25	115	15.1%	69.3%
	Asian/Asian British	0	1	0.0%	0.6%
	Black/Black British	0	4	0.0%	2.4%
	Mixed	6	11	3.6%	6.6%
	Other Ethnic Groups	0	1	0.0%	0.6%
	No Data	1	2	0.6%	1.2%

Table 4 - Demographics of children living with Medway Carers

5.10. Placement stability and permanence

- 5.10.1. Medway Council monitors permanence for children, and long-term fostering is agreed for children through Medway's Permanence Panel. Where the child is in a current long-term fostering arrangement, and it is agreed that this placement can meet the child's needs into adulthood, a permanent match assessment is completed. This assessment considers the carers' ability to meet the child's needs now and into the future and identifies any support which might be needed for the care arrangement.
- 5.10.2. Permanent match assessments for all Medway children, whether in-house or external placements, are taken to Medway's Fostering Panel for recommendation then approved by the Agency Decision Maker. 11 children were matched with their carers this year which is a reduction from the 35 matched in the previous year.
- 5.10.3. The number of children in long term stable placements, which is defined as longer than a year, stands at 220 on 31 March 2023. 60.94% of all foster placements, both in-house and IFAs, are permanent, providing stability for those children. The table below shows the total length of foster placements for all children placed with connected carers and generic carers.

Time in placement (on 31 March 2023)	0 - 3 months	3 - 6 months	6 - 12 months	1 - 2 years	2+ years	Total
Friends & relatives	11	4	10	5	4	34
Foster care	34	39	43	95	116	327
Total	45	43	53	100	120	361

Table 5 – Children in stable placements on 31 March 2023

- 5.10.4. The Fostering Service aims to identify any instability in care arrangements at the earliest opportunity. The service uses targeted support and regular placement stability meetings to improve placement stability.
- 5.10.5. During placement stability meetings, support and services are discussed which would enable the placement to continue and to help both the child and the carer. To further support placement stability, the Fostering Service employs two therapeutic support workers who work intensively with families who need additional support to help a child in placement. The service also has two “children’s champions” who work with and support children in care but also the birth children of foster families. These children are an often-neglected group within the fostering network but are often crucial to the success of placements.
- 5.10.6. Placement Disruption meetings are held if placements break down (for those that are longer than a year or deemed permanent). This enables the professional network to understand more fully what led to the breakdown, to ensure support is put in for the young person in their new placement, and to ensure that learning is absorbed into day-to-day practice to help prevent future breakdowns. These meetings will be organised and chaired by the Independent Reviewing Officer service.
- 5.11. Placement stability and the Hubs
- 5.11.1. Placements are being further supported by the development of the primary and adolescent hubs. The hub carers support approximately six fostering families, depending on need, offering sleep overs once a month for two nights for each child, emergency support at times of crisis, play dates and intensive therapeutic support. The carers in the hubs organise a coffee morning once a month and a community event once a month to bring the families and young people together, which assists in building relationships and the fostering community. Young people have intensive therapeutic work completed with them by staff and hub carers in both hubs.

- 5.11.2. The primary hub supports carers of children up to the age of 11 years. The primary hub carers slotted into a grandparent role with the younger children, taking them swimming, on bike rides or picnics in the park. The primary hub carers supported 6 children during last year. In March 2023 the primary hub carers resigned on grounds of ill health and the service is in the process of identifying and establishing a new hub.
- 5.11.3. During 2022-2023, the adolescent Hub supported 9 fostering families and 10 young people. Their garden provides sensory experiences including a sensory shed with lights, sounds and water features, they own the woods at the back of their garden where adolescents can enjoy wood working tasks, crafts or just enjoy the sensory area.

5.12. Foster Carer learning and development

- 5.12.1. Training and support to carers is key in developing a good fostering service where carers understand the task expected of them and are well supported and trained to enable them to put themselves into the mind of a child and understand what a child's behaviour is telling them. Following a review of training and expectations for carers, mandatory training was revised. Foster carers are expected to complete:
- Paediatric First Aid (to be completed by both carers) updated every 3 years;
 - Understanding child development (to be completed by both carers) updated every 3 years;
 - Understand behaviour of children and young people (to be completed by both carers) updated every 3 years;
 - Equality and Diversity (to be completed by both carers) updated every 3 years;
 - Safeguarding children level 1 (to be completed by both carers) updated every 3 years;
 - Online safety – risks to children (main carer and desirable for secondary carer) updated every 3 years;
 - Medication awareness and safe handling of medicines (to be completed by main carer and desirable for secondary carer) updated every 3 years;
 - Keeping good records (main carer and desirable for secondary carer) updated every 3 years;
 - GDPR foundation level (to be completed by both carers) updated every 3 years.
- 5.12.2. In addition to the mandatory training, there is a continuing focus on therapeutic parenting and all carers have been provided with access to the National Association of Therapeutic Parenting and Foster Talk. These providers offer access to support group, listening circles, mentor and other online resources.

- 5.12.3. Induction Training is offered to all new carers which comprises of 3 days of further training following approval. All existing foster carers have been booked on the training to ensure that the whole cohort of Medway foster carers receive the same information and adhere to the expectations of Medway Fostering Service. During 2022-2023, 34 foster carers from 19 households attended the Induction Training.
- 5.12.4. Although much of the training is online, some is now being provided face to face and this has included some bespoke training for carers of children with complex needs because of disability. This has been positively received by the carers.
- 5.12.5. Personal Development Plans (PDP) are used across the service. These allow foster carers to identify what their training goals are for the course of the year, as well as any additional support they will require to achieve this. Personal Development Plans are considered at foster carers annual review meetings, and progress is considered and recognised in this forum.
- 5.12.6. All approved foster carers must complete a Training Support and Development Standards (TSDS) portfolio in their first year of fostering and all connected carers within 18 months. The Fostering Service offers workshops to support carers in completing this portfolio, delivered by staff from within Fostering.
- 5.12.7. As part of the fostering review, the current scheme for payments linked to training has been reviewed and this is now linked to skills demonstrated by carers through their annual reviews and training completed. During 2022-2023, 32 foster carers completed their Training Support and Development Standards (TSDS) portfolio.

5.13. Support for carers, children and placements

- 5.13.1. Support groups are offered monthly to foster carers and there is an expectation that all carers attend support groups to meet their registration requirements.
- 5.13.2. There are formal support groups hosted across Medway and facilitated by supervising social workers and support workers. The reflection on support groups being conducted online highlights both the benefits and limitations of this format. On one hand, the online platform has allowed for increased accessibility and convenience, enabling foster carers to connect and receive support from the comfort of their own homes. However, the lack of face-to-face interaction and physical presence may have impacted the depth of connection and emotional support foster carers could receive from these groups. Additionally, technological barriers for some of the foster carers or connectivity issues could have hindered the participation and engagement in the support groups.
- 5.13.3. In light of this reflection, the plan for the coming year is to transition the support groups from online to face-to-face meetings in recognition of the value of in-person interaction. Face-to-face support groups provide opportunities for

foster carers to build a stronger voice, share experiences and receive immediate emotional support.

- 5.13.4. Medway Fostering Service offers mentoring and support to new carers throughout their first year. Carers are matched with an experienced foster carer who offers formal and informal support in understanding the fostering role. This service has also been offered when carers outside their first-year need support in managing a new task, such as moving children on to adoption.
- 5.13.5. Medway Council pay for all foster carers to be members of Foster Talk. Carers receive 24-hour support, as well as advice, guidance and resources on a range of issues.
- 5.13.6. A monthly newsletter is produced for carers, which contains all information relevant to the Service, ideas and suggestions, relevant research and legislation and upcoming training and opportunities.
- 5.13.7. The Fostering Service hosts events for the fostering families and the children in their care. Last year the celebrations events were: Fostering Fortnight celebration, Easter Party, Halloween Party, Sons' and Daughters' month and Christmas celebrations. These events offer an opportunity for foster carers to network, enabling children to spend time with other children in care, provide informal support to foster carers and their families and for the foster carers to feel valued by the Council.
- 5.13.8. Medway Council has renewed the Mind of My Own app to support children and young people in communicating their views. The Fostering Service has a Mind of My Own champion, and all carers are supported in utilising this to help children and young people give feedback and communicate. Supervising social workers also use this when working with children and young people.
- 5.14. Children's voice, participation and the Medway Children and Young People Council
 - 5.14.1. The Fostering Service benefits from the support of a care experienced young person attending the Skills to Foster course and a care experienced person sits on the Fostering Panel.
 - 5.14.2. Links have been made with the Medway Children and Young People Council (MCYPC) and foster carers have attended the MCYPC meeting to answer questions from young people around fostering. A foster carer also sits on the Corporate Parenting Board.
- 5.15. Service developments 2023-2023
 - 5.15.1. Medway Fostering is scoping out a response to the central government strategy Stable Homes Built on Love and will be canvassing the best way to engage with other Local Authorities to establish fostering clusters so that the Medway Fostering Service can access funding to support recruitment activities.

- 5.15.2. Considering the challenges to recruiting and retaining foster carers the Fostering Service refreshed the Recruitment Strategy and have planned several recruitment campaigns that promote fostering as a viable and rewarding career choice.
- 5.15.3. The Fostering Service completed a review of the fostering fees and for the year commencing on 1 April 2023, the service uplifted the fees to bring them in line with the National Fostering Minimum allowance.
- 5.15.4. During 2023 -2024 the service will strengthen the retention activities and hold regular meetings between foster carers and the senior leadership team, which will add an important layer of oversight and guidance to the fostering service development. These meetings provide an opportunity for strategic discussions, decision-making, and alignment with the service priorities, ensuring foster cares are involved in co-production of service development.
- 5.15.5. The service is committed to support the provision of face-to-face support groups with scheduled dates throughout the year and agreed agendas which creates a supportive network for foster carers. This allows for sharing experiences, addressing challenges, and receiving guidance in a structured and collaborative setting.
- 5.15.6. The service will focus on supporting and empowering foster carers to provide care for children who present with complex needs and will work to identify foster carers that can take over the primary hub, which was lost due to the carers resigning.
- 5.15.7. In order to support the self-evaluation and continue with the development of the fostering service, the service will be conducting monthly performance audits which will help the managers in the service to monitor the effectiveness and efficiency of the Fostering Service and ensure accountability and data accuracy.

6. Risk management

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Insufficient in-house fostering placements available	There is a risk that there is insufficient accommodation to ensure that placements are right for the child and that this could lead to utilising more expensive	There is a recruitment strategy in place to recruit more Medway foster carers. The offer to foster carers has been reviewed to attract more carers to Medway.	BII

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
	external foster placements.	Development of a recruitment service to ensure assessments are timely and applicants are well supported.	
Training and support to carers does not equip them sufficiently to parent children who have suffered significant trauma	<p>Carers need good quality support and challenge from supervising social workers who are well trained and have caseloads at levels that allow for regular high quality support visits.</p> <p>Without this support, placement breakdowns are more likely which is damaging to children in care</p>	<p>Staffing in the service has been increased and additional support staff give extra support to placements.</p> <p>Placement stability meetings are called as soon as any issues arise, and this area will be further strengthened.</p>	BII

Likelihood	Impact:
A Very likely	I Catastrophic
B Likely	II Major
C Unlikely	III Moderate
D Rare	IV Minor

8. Consultation

- 8.1. Foster carers are regularly asked for feedback on various aspects of the service and were fully consulted on the proposed changes to the payment scheme for carers. To strengthen the fostering voice and promote collaboration, the new service manager introduced a six-weekly forum. This forum serves as a platform for foster carers to share experiences, exchange ideas, and provide feedback. It facilitates open and constructive discussions, encouraging a sense of community and support among Medway foster carers.
- 8.2. The forum includes the Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Head of Provider Service, who actively participate and engage with the carers. Their presence highlights the Council's commitment to listening to foster carers' concerns, suggestions, and needs.

9. Climate change implications

- 9.1. There are no climate change implications arising from this report.

10. Financial implications

- 10.1. The failure to secure sufficient numbers of in-house placements will continue to result in more young people being placed in more expensive external placements creating further budget pressures on an already overspent placement budget.
- 10.2. Failure to continue to develop the service or keep our allowances in line with other Local Authorities and agencies will result in more foster carers resigning and further loss of in-house placements. This in turn forces us to use more external placements.

11. Legal implications

- 11.1. There are no legal implications for the Council arising from this report.

Lead officer contact

Ingrid Crisan, Head of Service, Provider Services, Children's Social Care

Tel: (01634) 331505

Email: ingrid.crisan@medway.gov.uk.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Fostering Service Structure Chart

Background papers

None