

CABINET

12 JANUARY 2021

ANNUAL FOSTERING REPORT

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Mrs Josie Iles, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services (Lead Member)

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Summary

The Annual Report for the Fostering Service sets out the work completed over the last year, how in-house fostering services have met the needs of Medway's looked after children and establishes the work which should be undertaken in the coming year.

Please note that a further Annual Report will be produced in May 2021 which will detail the work for the financial year and this report will be produced annually in May in subsequent years.

The Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the Annual Fostering Report on 1 December 2020. The comments of this Committee are set out in section 17 of the report. The report has been updated to include the addition information requested by the Committee.

1. Budget and policy framework

- 1.1. This is a report on the performance of the Medway Council Fostering Service in line with Department for Education National Minimum Standards and other Statutory Guidance. It provides details of the Medway Council Fostering Service activity between September 2019 and September 2020. This Annual Report also sets out plans for future service development.
- 1.2. The Fostering Regulations 25.7 states that the executive side of the Local Authority or the independent foster service's provider/trustees, board members or management committee members receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the fostering service.

- 1.3. They should also satisfy themselves that the provider is complying with conditions of registration and that they monitor the management and outcomes of the services in order to satisfy themselves that the service is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children.
- 1.4. This report is consistent with national policy, legislation and guidance. It is linked to key local planning documents, in particular the Medway Council Looked After Children Strategy and the Council Plan priority that Children and Young People have the best start in life in Medway.

2. Background

- 2.1. The Annual Report is for a wide audience of stakeholders and other interested parties including Elected Members, service users, staff and colleagues from other agencies. It gives details of activity, performance and developments in the Fostering Service over a 12-month period.
- 2.2. The report gathers performance data on the service, its development in the preceding year and sets goals and targets for the coming year.
- 2.3. The report will consider recruitment activity, direction, and advertising for the coming year and what other work is being undertaken to increase the number of Medway Council foster carers.

3. Advice and analysis

- 3.1. The work of Medway Council Fostering Service is governed by the Fostering Services Regulations 2011, The National Minimum Standards 2011 and the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 (amended) and associated amended regulations and guidance.
- 3.2. Medway Council's Fostering Team objectives are listed below. They are central to the development and growth of the Fostering Service.
 - Ensure that permanency is at the heart of all our planning and that we will work in partnership with colleagues across Children's Social Care to secure positive outcomes for children involved in care proceedings within the required timescales.
 - Ensure that young people in care achieve their potential academically and they have access to a range of opportunities for employment, training or further education.
 - Ensure young people leaving care make a successful transition to adulthood.
 - Ensure that children looked after and care leavers' views and experiences inform current and future service delivery.
 - Improve the health and well-being of looked after young people and care leavers.
 - Provide timely and high-quality interventions with partner agencies to help children remain living or return to their families, where appropriate.

- 3.3. Medway Council Fostering Service provides safe, regulated foster care placements for our looked after children and contributes to improving outcomes for our most vulnerable children and young people. The key priority for the service is to ensure that all children looked after by Medway, whether the arrangement is short or long term are cared for in loving, secure and stable families.
- 3.4. The Fostering Network (State of the Nation's Foster Care 2019) reports a continuing national shortage of foster carers. It estimates that over 7,000 more foster carers are required to meet the needs of children coming into care. The report highlights an increase in foster carers over the age of 55 years and a decrease in younger carers. Carers are essential members of the team around the child and their role and commitment is not always recognised. The report highlighted that 50% of carers have experienced caring for a child who has been violent in the home, self-harmed, gone missing or been involved with the police. Carers are increasingly dealing with children who have highly complex needs as a result of early trauma and need additional training and support to manage these needs.
- 3.5. Medway Fostering Service is actively responding to these challenges through the work of the recruitment team, with a dedicated Recruitment and Marketing Officer and a Recruitment Senior who monitors and responds to all enquiries with her team, and through the Generic and Connected Teams who support and train our carers.
- 3.6. The pandemic through 2020 has affected all aspects of the work of the Fostering Service and has challenged carers in different ways. We anticipated that the initial lockdown would create placement instability, but placements were very stable during this period and children and young people struggled more with the anxieties created as we moved out of lockdown and when schools returned. We know that this pattern has been repeated in other areas of the South East. However, the anxieties created by the lockdown and the pandemic in general have affected carers and children alike.
- 3.7. The Fostering Service has worked hard to keep the service going through the pandemic. We have kept carers updated with a weekly email containing information about services and support, and carers had weekly contact with their Supervising Social Worker through video calls to ensure they felt supported during the initial lockdown. As time has gone on, a combination of virtual calls and face to face visits has been adopted to ensure children are seen and safeguarded and carers are supported.
- 3.8. At the start of the lockdown, we had some concerns about placement availability, given a halt in recruitment and some older carers refusing placements because of their own health needs. Some independent fostering agencies were also closing their doors to new placements. In order to ensure that we had sufficient placements, all carers were approached about their availability to take additional placements if needed and an email was sent to the whole Council to ask for any further families who might be prepared to be

assessed and then take a child in an emergency. The response was very positive and several families were assessed and approved under The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 which allowed approval by the agency decision maker. Although we eventually made very few placements under these regulations, the positive response by the whole of the Council was appreciated.

4. Fostering Service Structure Chart

4.1. The structure of the Fostering Service is set out at Appendix 1.

5. The Fostering Service

5.1. Medway Council Fostering Service has several component parts which includes recruitment and approval of foster carers, a generic fostering team which offers practical and emotional support to approved carers as per statutory requirements, supported lodgings providers and connected carers.

5.2. Connected Carers team within the Fostering Service assess carers who are connected to the child placed and operates under the same regulations. The work of the team is covered in Section 9.

5.3. The Generic Fostering Team is currently staffed by 13 permanent practitioners. Due to a combination of maternity leave and long-term sickness, and changes of staff, the team have been under pressure during the last year.

5.4. The work of the generic team is supported by a Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) who is a member of the IRO Team. She undertakes all the annual reviews of foster carers. This independence ensures a level of impartiality and offers a mechanism for safeguarding the child and carer.

5.5. The Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer also completes Standards of Care Review meetings, where concerns have been identified regarding carers. This again allows a level of independence from the Fostering Service, and the officer will then take these cases to Fostering Panel where appropriate for fuller discussion and recommendations on continued approval.

5.6. The Connected Carers team is also staffed by permanent workers. Although there have been some changes in staff in the last year, they have recently recruited to all vacant posts and will be fully staffed from January, albeit with one team member on maternity leave.

5.7. A fostering duty system operates daily to support the finding, matching and placing of children with Medway Council foster carers. The system operates between 8.45am and 5.15pm Monday to Thursday, 8.45am and 4.45pm on Fridays and is also available for support to carers if their own Supervising Social Worker is not available.

5.8. The Fostering Service works closely with teams across Children's Services to ensure that the child's care plan is progressed without any delay and best

outcomes for vulnerable children are met. The development of a dedicated Children in Care service earlier this year has enabled better communication and co-working for the benefit of looked after children.

- 5.9. The support level for both the child and the foster carer is considered at the point of matching, as part of the placement plan, and subject to regular placement support meetings as required.

6. Recruitment

- 6.1. Fostering recruitment remains the key priority across the Fostering Service for both foster carers and Supported Lodgings providers.

- 6.2. Recruitment is particularly targeted for the following groups:

- Foster carers for older children and teenagers;
- Foster carers for sibling groups;
- Foster carers for children with more challenging needs; and
- Foster carers for Parent and Child placements.

- 6.3. The Skills to Foster Training is undertaken at regular intervals to ensure there is no delay in progressing potential new foster carers through the assessment process. Since the pandemic this has been delivered online and the Team have been very creative when designing and delivering this to ensure that potential carers receive all the information they need.

- 6.4. The Fostering Team have adapted their 'Introduction to Fostering' events to a virtual capacity. Running twice a month, the virtual events have been occurring since August. The Fostering Team are offering "coffee mornings" and "evening socials" to fit in around prospective foster carers' schedules. The events are targeted at prospective carers, transfers and previous enquiries.

- 6.5. These events have been advertised widely including via Facebook scheduled posts, monthly Foster Carer newsletters, new and recent enquiries, publicised internally via Medspace and Let's Talk, externally via Medway Matters and also, amongst willing collaborators such as Medway Community Healthcare (MCH) and Medway Diversity Forum panel members.

6.6. Advertising activity

- 6.6.1. There has been continued investment in recruitment to include marketing and advertising. There has been a new mobile optimised website launched and content and language has been refreshed and pages updated. Research shows a steady increase in traffic to the Medway Council Fostering pages.

- 6.6.2. The Recruitment and Marketing Strategy was updated in May following the appointment of a new Recruitment and Marketing Officer in March. We have commissioned adverts on radio, and Google AdWords have been used to help optimise the higher ranking on search engines.

6.6.3. The pandemic and lockdown continues to affect recruitment but the advertising campaign was launched towards the end of lockdown with a view to capturing those people who may have been furloughed and were looking for alternative opportunities and others who were considering a change of direction in their working lives.

6.7. Recruitment activity

6.7.1. From January 2020 to September 2020, there have been 89 enquiries received and 27 progressed to initial visits and currently there are 10 households who have attended Skills to Foster and 1 household booked on to the next Skills to Foster training in November, with 8 carers at Stage 1 of assessment, 6 at Stage 2. Approvals in total since January 2020 has been 3.

6.7.2. Between April 2019 and March 2020, out of 10 potential transfer-ins from an IFA, only 2 transferred to Medway. The reasons provided were around lack of support, including finance, and no paid respite. This will be explored further in this report in section 16.

6.7.3. With on average one out of ten enquiries progressing to approval as foster carers, over the last 3 years, spikes in enquiry levels have been seen in September, October and January, with dips in the level of enquiries during, for example, school holiday periods; April, August, December. The pandemic and lockdown have affected all enquiries.

7. Fostering Panel

7.1. Membership of Fostering Panels and their functions in respect of approving, reviewing and terminating approvals are set out in the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the Children Act Guidance Volume 4 Fostering Services 2011. Fostering panels have a crucial role in the provision and monitoring of foster care for children.

7.2. The Fostering Panel has various functions, including responsibility for approving foster carers and the numbers and ages of children for whom they are approved, approving 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 permanency planning where long-term fostering is considered the best option and the child is being matched with their permanent foster carers.

7.3. Fostering Panels are held at least once a month, but in the last year have generally be held twice per month to accommodate all panel business.

Number of panels held 2019/20	29
New Panel members	5
Resignation from Panel	1

Cancelled panels due to not being quorate	0
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- 7.4. Panel membership includes a Chair, Vice-Chair, Independent Members, Social Workers, Health and Education representatives, and local councillors. As a result of feedback from the Ofsted report, significant changes have been made to the membership of the Fostering Panel including the appointment of an interim Panel Chair who oversaw the business of panel for a year and the appointment of a new permanent Panel Chair who has recently begun his tenure. All current panel members have had an appraisal and some new panel members have been appointed to ensure that Panel is robust in its challenge on cases presented and has good representation from people with relevant experience. One panel member has resigned as a result of his annual appraisal.
- 7.5. Following the lockdown in March as a result of Covid 19, the Panel became virtual and has continued to be virtual using Microsoft Teams since that time. The government introduced changes to regulations as a result of Covid which allowed for Agency Decision Makers to agree placements in place of panels and for reduced quoracy. Despite the challenges, no panels have been cancelled and the work of panel has continued, although the reduced quoracy has been used on two occasions when panel members had difficulty joining because of technology constraints.

Summary of panel business, cases heard and categories

Form F (Approval of foster carers)	4
Form C (Full approval of connected carers as foster carers for specific child)	12
Change of Approval for foster carers	1
Permanent Match of child to carers	51
Standards of Care (concerns regarding care given to a child)	10 + 4 reviews of SOC
Variation of Approval of foster carer	2
Annual Review (first, third and supplementary report)	5
Termination of Approval	15
Change to the Usual Fostering Limit	0
Extension of Temporary Approval of connected carer	5
Change of Approval following Annual Review	5
Exemption (IFA)	1
Approval Review	1

- 7.6. Of particular note in terms of panel business during the last year has been the high number of permanent matches agreed. For the children involved in these matches, they can now enjoy knowing where they will live until they reach adulthood and a sense of being “claimed” and being safe with carers who want them to remain as part of their family.

- 7.7. In the year 2019/20 we have had 20 carers leave Medway, which is an increase from 11 or 12 in the previous three years. The increase this year is at least in part due to Standards of Care investigations. Previous year's show about 30% of carers being de-registered for this reason whereas this has increased to nearly 50% in the last year. In this last year, 6 carers were de-registered following a Standards of Care investigation and a further 3 carers resigned following concerns from the Fostering Service about care being provided. 11 carers resigned for personal reasons. Of the carers that resigned for personal reasons, 4 retired from fostering after many years of service. Others resigned in order to take alternative employment or similar reasons. Although losing 9 carers to concerns about care provided is disappointing, it does nevertheless emphasise that the service and the panel will not tolerate anything less than the highest standards for our looked after children.
- 7.8. Training to Panel members has not been formerly delivered during the period since lockdown. However, the agency advisor has used panel meetings to update panel members on relevant changes to legislation and court rulings, especially in the field of connected carers. Following the appointment of the new panel chair, it is intended to organise some joint training between panel members and the fostering service, and training for panel members separately.

8. Fostering Payments

- 8.1. It has been recognised for some time that Medway's remuneration for foster carers is different from neighbouring authorities and lower than Independent Fostering Agencies. We know that Local Authorities cannot match the amounts paid by Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs), but we also know that IFAs are increasingly being run by "for profit" centrally run enterprises. These do not give carers the support they want from locally based and knowledgeable Supervising Social Workers. We believe that if we can improve our support package to carers including basic remuneration, we are likely to be able to attract more carers to foster for Medway.
- 8.2. In addition, a new payment scheme went live in 2018 with some aspects, especially the payments for respite care and mileage, proving unpopular with carers.
- 8.3. A full review of the fostering service including provider payments and rewards, is shortly to be undertaken.

9. Connected Carers

9.1. Work of the Team

- 9.1.1. The Connected Carers team undertakes assessments of prospective family members and friends when it may not be possible for a child or young person to remain in the care of their birth parents. The team undertakes work with family and friends who provide and support placements for children and

young people with extended family members and other connected people who have a prior relationship with a child/ young person. This area of activity continues to grow in part due to the demands made by the courts following the implementation of the 26 week time scale for dealing with care proceedings, but also due to the expectation that all potential family and friends will be considered if a child cannot safely return home. There were 55 new Special Guardianship and Connected Carer assessments undertaken in the year, up from 36 in the previous year. This is an area of work that is likely to continue to grow and further legislation in this area is expected.

- 9.1.2. When an alternative carer is being considered, and the child is not already placed with the prospective carer, a viability assessment will be undertaken by a qualified social worker. In essence, this is a brief assessment, assessing whether the potential placement is viable. This will include safeguarding checks being undertaken such as police checks. If the assessment is positive, a furthermore in-depth assessment is undertaken. This is usually a 'Special Guardianship Assessment'. There were 89 Viability Assessments undertaken in the year, an increase from 69 in the previous year.
- 9.1.3. There are times when a Looked after Child or young person is placed with alternative carers in emergency situations. These emergency placements are made under Regulation 24 of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010. This would entail a Regulation 24 Temporary Approval assessment and the carers would be fully assessed as family and friends foster carers under Fostering Regulations. The recruitment and assessment process differs from that for mainstream foster carers but still requires compliance with the Fostering Regulations 2011.
- 9.1.4. The team has a crucial role in keeping children within their extended family if it is safe to do so and meeting the overall strategy of keeping children in local permanent placements. This includes providing ongoing support, advice, guidance and training to the prospective carers, to ensure that they have the necessary skills to care for the child or young person. To promote this further the team are now providing "Skills to Foster" for prospective Special Guardians and Connected Carers. This will ensure that these carers receive a high level of training and preparation before the child joins their family.
- 9.1.5. Over the past year the service continues to improve in ensuring better outcomes for children. The team is committed to ensuring that children are placed with the right people at the right time. The key to this is ensuring that assessments are robust, support for families is effective and partnership working is strong.
- 9.1.6. Until now Special Guardianship support has been managed from within the Adoption Team but with the formation of the Regional Adoption Agency with Kent County Council and London Borough of Bexley, Special Guardianship support is transferring to the Connected Carers Team. This will enable the team to develop better support networks and provide a better

comprehensive service to this group of carers. It is also anticipated that the provision of support service by the team will bring additional opportunities for workers to learn about the challenges that Guardians face which will in turn improve assessment practice.

9.2. Key priorities for the coming year are as follows:

- 9.2.1. Continue to improve the quality of assessments further, to ensure that they are child focused, analytical and evidence based, with clear analysis of the applicant's ability to meet the child/children's needs in the long-term to be evident in assessments. Children to be seen and spoken to alone and direct work to be undertaken with children.
- 9.2.2. Every Connected Carers and Special Guardianship Assessment to explore the family and environmental factors which have shaped the life of the child thus far and the potential long-term impact/consequences of such.
- 9.2.3. Maintaining good working relationships with key professionals across the service to promote cohesiveness in service delivery. This is to include but is not limited to: carers, internal children's services and legal colleagues across departments; external statutory partners such as health, education, police; and voluntary agencies such as the 'Young Lives Foundation' and 'Family Action. Every agency who is involved with the child should be consulted as part of the assessment process.
- 9.2.4. Engagement and consultation with children and families. Feedback forms to be developed to enable children and families and professionals to provide feedback to drive service improvement. Children to be consulted and their views to be obtained and recorded.
- 9.2.5. Improvement in the support, advice, guidance and training available for prospective carers, to ensure that they have the necessary skills to care for the child or young person, including consolidation of the Skills to Foster training, wider promotion of the Special Guardian Support Group and improvement in support to provide a better service to Special Guardians in Medway.

10. Allegations/ Quality of Care/ Complaints

10.1. Allegations and Quality of Care Concerns

- 10.1.1. All allegations and quality of care concerns are fully explored and analysed to ensure safe practice going forward.
- 10.1.2. In total during the year, 13 carers were reported to LADO for investigation. Of these 3 resigned prior to a Standards of Care investigation. 6 were presented to panel and deregistered and 3 were put on action plans, with approval to continue. In all of the cases reported to LADO, the concerns were substantiated.

10.1.3. Although it is disappointing that this number of carers were investigated because of concerns about standards of care provided, it does reflect the ethos of the service where poor practice will not be tolerated.

10.2. Fostering Complaints

10.2.1. For the period of 2019/20 there was one complaint made by a parent about a foster carer and one made by a foster carer about the fostering service. There have been 3 further complaints from foster carers about the Children in Care Service.

11. Placement and carer information

11.1. All referrals for placement are considered by both in-house fostering and by the Placements 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.

11.2. Of all the children who were new entries to care, only 50% were placed in internal placements during the last year. This is a significant reduction over recent years from around 62% and reflects the reduction in numbers of in-house carers due to resignations and de-registrations, alongside the significant increase in the number of children in care in Medway. This highlights the continuing need to recruit more in-house carers to ensure we can offer placements with our own in-house carers and reduce the numbers of children who are placed with Independent Agencies.

11.3. Demographics of children living with Medway Carers

Placements as at 30 Sep '20		Connected care	In-house foster care (% of fostered)
Age	Age 0	0	19 (66%)
	Aged 1- 4	2	27 (55%)
	Aged 5- 9	1	36 (47%)
	Aged 10-15	19	76 (50%)
	Aged 16-17	7	23 (58%)
Parent & child		0	5 (71%)
Gen der	Female	10	82 (53%)
	Male	19	99 (51%)
Child with a disability		3	9 (47%)
Ethnicity	White	27	154 (52%)
	Asian/Asian British	0	4 (80%)
	Black/Black British	1	6 (38%)
	Mixed	1	16 (62%)
	Other Ethnic Groups	0	1 (33%)
	BME Total	2	27 (54%)

The above table gives the breakdown of the numbers of children of different ages and the percentages of children in care on a particular day - 30 September 2020.

11.4. In the last couple of years requests for Parent and Child placements have significantly increased. The Service has actively recruited and trained and approved existing carers to be Parent and Child carers. We currently have 15 carers approved and able to take parent and child placements and a further 3 carers who are undertaking the training with a view to changing their approval. Over the course of the year we have been able to meet 12 of the 18 (67%) requests for Parent and Child placements. Given the high cost of these placements, this is a significant achievement.

11.5. The focus of the Service continues to be to recruit and develop carers who are able to meet the often very complex and challenging needs of some of our children, and particularly those between the age of 5 and 15 years.

11.6. Leaving Care services including Supported Lodgings

11.6.1. The Fostering Service is beginning to work much more closely with the Leaving Care service to develop better pathways for those young people who need different and variable resources to develop their independence skills and prepare them for adult life. Supported Lodgings is one of the possible resources and we need to further develop this resource locally to improve the numbers of available placements. These placements need dedicated support which can work across fostering and leaving care.

11.6.2. The Staying Put policy is being reviewed to also encourage more foster carers to offer this level of support to young people in placement.

12. Placement stability and permanence

12.1. In 2015, Long term fostering gained legal status in England ensuring its importance as a positive permanent outcome for children. The Care Planning and Fostering Regulations 2015, provide a revised definition of permanence in England:

"Permanence is the long-term plan for the child's upbringing and provides an underpinning framework for all social work with children and families from family support through to adoption. The objective of planning for permanence is therefore to ensure that children have a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond and to give them a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging."

12.2. 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, a Permanent Match assessment is completed. This assessment considers the carers' ability to meet the child's needs now and into the future.

- 12.3. Permanent Match assessments for all Medway children, whether in-house or external placements, are taken to Fostering Panel for recommendation then approved by the Agency Decision Maker. 51 permanent matches were taken this year, and more are scheduled into Panel business moving forward.
- 12.4. The number of children in long term stable placements, which is defined as longer than a year, continues to grow and stands at 117 in September 2020. For 87 of these, a permanent match has been agreed with the child and foster carer. 65% of all foster placements, both in-house and IFA, are now classed as 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.

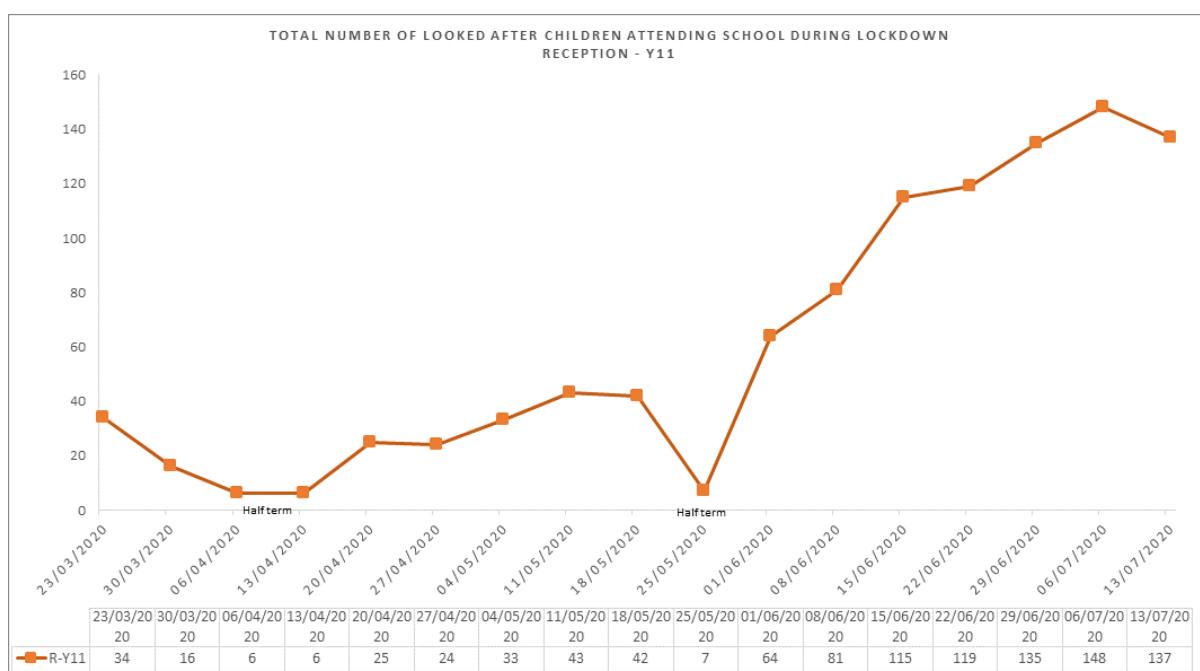
Time in placement (as at 30 Sep '20)	0 - 3 MThs	3 - 6 mths	6 - 12 mths	1 - 2 years	2+ years	Total
Friends & relatives	6	5	3	3	12	29
Foster care	21	21	22	36	81	181
Total	27	26	25	39	93	210

- 12.5. The Fostering Service aims to identify any instability in placement at the earliest opportunity. To further support this, the Children in Care Service and the Fostering Service are working together to improve the recording of placement information to better identify those placements at risk of breakdown so we can target support at the earliest opportunity. The use of targeted support and regular placement stability meetings to ensure it is effective will improve placement stability.
- 12.6. 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. Services such as a family support worker or fostering mentor are commonly identified.
- 12.7. Placement Disruption meetings are held if placements are longer than a year, or deemed permanent, and breakdown. 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.
- 12.8. During the first lockdown from March until June, we were concerned that a number of placements would quickly become fragile as a result of schools closing and additional pressure being placed on carers and children and young people spending extended periods of time at home together alongside the additional pressure of encouraging children to continue with school work.
- 12.9. Analysis of figures of placement breakdowns before, during and after the lockdown show that the breakdown rate due to a carer struggling to manage the child's behaviour rather than for other reasons, has remained fairly constant, averaging at around 12 per quarter. In the main those whose

placement changed in April and May during the beginning of lockdown were moves planned prior to but delayed by the lockdown. Breakdowns did increase to 6 in each of July and August, and some of these were as a result of more challenging behaviour following the ending of the lockdown but by September this had reduced to 1 breakdown.

12.10. Feedback from carers about the impact of the lockdown was in the main positive with many reporting that their children and young people were more settled without the peer pressure they feel within school. They felt safe and contained within their fostering placement and many carers reported that attainment had improved because they had been able to focus on school work without the distractions of the classroom.

12.11. In terms of school attendance, many carers in consultation with the child's social worker, agreed to support the children with their education at home during the initial lockdown. Below is a graph showing the school attendance throughout the initial lockdown period through to the end of the summer term. There were some children who struggled with the lack of school routine, hence the gradual increase in numbers attending school prior to the ending of the lockdown.



13. Foster Carer Learning & Development

13.1. Mandatory training

13.1.1. Following a review of training and expectations for carers, mandatory training was revised. Foster carers are now 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

13.1.2. In addition to the mandatory training, there is a continuing focus on therapeutic parenting through the NSPCC Reflective Fostering training programme which is being delivered to all carers. Such training aims to encourage all carers to put themselves into the mind of the child and to understand behaviour from the child's perspective. This training will continue to be a focus for the team to ensure that all carers parent therapeutically and are supported to do so by the Team.

13.1.3. During the last 2 years, Induction Training has been introduced for all new carers which comprises 3 days of further training following approval. All existing foster carers have also been booked onto these days training to ensure that the whole cohort of Medway foster carers receive the same information and adhere to the expectations of Medway Fostering Service.

13.1.4. Much of the ongoing foster carer training is now online in response to requests from carers. Certificates are provided from the training to ensure the service can monitor the training undertaken. Support groups are focussed on particular areas, such as adolescents, babies, parent and child and attendance at these groups is monitored.

13.2. Personal Development Review

13.2.1. Personal Development Reviews (PDR) are now being 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.

13.2.2. PDR's are considered at foster carers annual review meetings, and progress is considered and recognised in this forum.

13.3. Training Levels and Specialisms

- 13.3.1. As part of the last payment review, training was separated into 3 levels, Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced. Carers are able to complete and maintain their mandatory training and remain as Foundation carers.
- 13.3.2. Courses offered at Intermediate level enable carers to gain a deeper understanding of the children they are looking after and begin to discuss a more therapeutic and holistic approach to caring. Carers wishing to attain this level are also expected to attend 4 support groups (generic or themed to the relevance of the young people placed in their care) throughout each year.
- 13.3.3. Advanced level is achieved by completing Intermediate level training courses, but there is then a focus on sharing this knowledge and experience with other carers. Advanced level carers would be expected to:
 - be a trained peer mentor and actively supporting new carers
 - Offer at least three mentoring sessions to new or existing carers as required
 - attend 4 support groups every year
 - All training for all levels must be evidenced in practice throughout the year and recorded in carers training logs.
- 13.3.4. For each of the specialisms and lead areas, key partners have also been invited to deliver training and workshops to increase carers' professional network and encourage joint working. Agencies invited to date are Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), Open Road, the NSPCC and the Looked After Children's nurses.

13.4. Training, Standard and Development (TSD) Portfolios and Workshops

- 13.4.1. All approved foster carers must complete a TSD portfolio in their first year of fostering and all connected carers within 18 months.
- 13.4.2. The Fostering Service offers workshops to support carers in completing this portfolio, delivered by staff from within fostering.
- 13.4.3. Two sets of workshops are run each year, and carers can attend some or all of the sessions.

13.5. Access to external training and opportunities

- 13.5.1. All foster carers have access to training through Medway Safeguarding Children's Partnership.
- 13.5.2. Foster carers have had opportunities to be involved in Skills to Foster training, student social worker interviews, and a variety of other external training opportunities.

13.5.3. The pandemic this year has limited opportunities to develop more face to face training, which was requested by carers. However joint life story training with the Children in Care Teams was commissioned and started but has again been put on hold due to the current lockdown.

14. Support for carers, children and placements

14.1. Support groups

14.1.1. Support groups were offered monthly to foster carers. The level of attendance required by each fostering household varies depending on whether they wish to meet Foundation, Intermediate or Advanced level requirements.

14.1.2. Following the initial lockdown, support groups were initially suspended but then became virtual meetings. The response to these was very positive with many carers saying that they preferred them because they did not need childcare and the meetings themselves were more focussed and supportive.

14.1.3. The Support groups during lockdown and since have had increasing attendance, with a wider range of carers in attendance and the opportunity to share their thoughts and feedback about the service, the challenges they face and their positive achievements. It is likely that going forward

14.2. Community Based Fostering

14.2.1. Medway Fostering Service has developed a Community Based fostering scheme. The aim of this is to support children and young people who are likely to experience multiple placement breakdown.

14.2.2. Children involved in this scheme, and their carers, receive the support of a 'hub' carer, who are "grandparent-like" figures. They offer 24/7 support to the carers and regular respite (sleepovers) to the children in their group at their home. They also organise regular social events and tailored support groups alongside the fostering social workers.

14.2.3. The first Hub group started last year for children up to the age of 11 years where concerns have been identified that indicate they could be vulnerable to multiple placement breakdowns unless support is put in place now to improve relationships between child and carer. Unfortunately, Covid and lockdown meant that we could not fully utilise the Hub for respite, but the carers were used to give telephone support to all carers who needed it.

14.2.4. A further hub carer has been identified to work with teenage placements at risk of breakdown. It was anticipated that this would be operational early this year, but again Covid intervened in this plan. With the new lockdown and Covid restrictions, the timing of opening this Hub is uncertain but we anticipate opening early next year.

14.3 Support

- 14.3.1. The Fostering Service was joined by a Family Support Worker (FSW) in June 2017. The FSW has been working closely with families where the child or young person presents some challenges, where the carer needs additional support and guidance or where the placement appears unstable. The FSW is also working closely with the Community Hub.
- 14.3.2. 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.
- 14.3.3. Medway Council pay for all foster carers to be members of The Fostering Network. Carers receive 24-hour support, as well as advice, guidance and resources on a range of issues.
- 14.3.4. 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. As mentioned earlier, we have also sent out a weekly email since April with Covid related information, including hints and tips for supporting schooling at home, supporting with anxiety and mental health concerns, and many links to resources for both education and health, alongside any other resources which might benefit carers.

14.4 Support for children

- 14.4.1. Prior to the pandemic, every half term, events were run for children, young people and their carers to encourage them to enjoy time together and also to get to know us better as a Service. However, these face to face activities have been stopped as a result of Covid but competitions and activities have been run online to engage with looked after and also birth children of carers. The Team ran a series of successful activities recently for Sons and Daughters month.
- 14.4.2. Sons and Daughters Month focuses on the contributions made by the birth children of foster carers to the fostering role and gives thanks for those contributions. During this period birth children were encouraged to share their experiences of being part of a fostering family and these experiences will be used to inform new applicants so in turn their children are better prepared.
- 14.4.3. 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.

15. Children's voice, participation and the Medway Children and Young People Council

15.1. The Fostering Service had been developing the following areas of involvement and participation for children and young people through 2019 in addition to those mentioned above. Some have not reached fruition again due to the pandemic

- A care experienced Young Person attends our Skills to Foster course.
- A care experienced person sits on our Fostering Panel.
- Links have been made with the Medway Children and Young People Council (MCYPC).
- Foster Carers have attended the MCYPC meeting to answer questions from young people around fostering.
- A member of the fostering team will be attending MCYPC meetings to ask young people what they feel we should be asking foster carers when we assess them, and what we should be asking when we interview staff for the fostering service.

15.2. The Fostering Service intends to write a Statement of Purpose for children about the Fostering Service to sit alongside the general Statement of Purpose and MCYCP will be invited to help the service write this document.

16. Service Developments 2020/21

16.1. This report has highlighted some of the positive work that is being done by the fostering service but has also highlighted some of the challenges we face, and in particular the need to recruit more carers and to support all our carers to parent therapeutically to enable our children in care to develop secure attachments to their carers, to limit the ongoing damage caused by early trauma, to understand their life stories and to improve placement stability.

16.2. As part of their work as Partners in Practice, Essex County Council reviewed the fostering service in May 2020 and produced a report which highlighted some of the same positive aspects of the service but also highlighted areas in need of improvement. As a result of this report, a review of the fostering service is underway to identify the required changes in order to improve the service which will require significant investment in resources as part of the 2020-21 budget build setting process.

16.3. We anticipate the offer to carers will need to be reviewed to attract more carers to foster for Medway, both new applicants considering a career in fostering and also established carers who want to transfer from Independent Fostering Agencies.

- 16.4. The fostering service staffing structure will need to be reviewed with the aim of creating additional dedicated teams to support and improve the service.
17. Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 1 December 2020.
- 17.1. The Committee considered a report on the performance of the Fostering Service for the period September 2019-2020. The Assistant Director, Children’s Social Care confirmed to the Committee that current figures for in-house fostering was at 157 households.
- 17.2. Members then raised a number of questions and comments, which included:
- 17.2.1. **Impact of the pandemic on placements** – in response to a query about the impact of the pandemic on placements, particularly in relation to children not attending school during the initial lockdown, officers confirmed that some foster families had enjoyed the opportunity to bond and concentrate on family time; but for others it was challenging for them to have children at home 24/7 and to manage the change in routine. Support was offered to both foster carers and the children and there had been few disruptions, with those that did occur happening towards the end of the lockdown period or as the lockdown eased, with children experiencing anxiety at that stage. Officers undertook to provide details of the number of breakdowns and to provide a comparison with the previous year, as well as the number of looked after children attending school during the initial lockdown.
- 17.2.2. **Payment of foster carers** – in response to a question about financial rewards given to foster carers who care for children with additional needs relating to disabilities, officers confirmed this was the case for those caring for children with complex disabilities. Officers confirmed they were reviewing this to ensure Medway remained competitive.
- 17.2.3. **Recruitment of foster carers** – reference was made to the low conversion rate of recruited foster carers from initial application. In response officers confirmed that there were a number of reasons why those being recruited as foster carers was so low compared to the number expressing interest and that Medway needed to become more competitive. The service’s vision was to train and support all carers to parent therapeutically to support young people with their trauma. For that reason the service would be robust about approving foster carers. The point was also made that the covid-19 pandemic had impacted recruitment considerably in the year of reporting.
- 17.2.4. **No of carers reported to the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO)** – officers stated that this data reflected that Medway would not accept anything but the best for its children.
- 17.2.5. **Demographics of children living with Medway carers** – it was requested to include at this table (at section 11.3 of the report) information around SEND and complex needs.

17.2.6. **Recruiting carers from ethnic minority backgrounds** – a suggestion was made that the Medway Diversity Forum could help in raising awareness for recruitment of foster carers amongst families from ethnic minority groups.

17.3. The Committee noted the report and forwarded its comments to the Cabinet.

In accordance with Council rule 12.6, Councillors Howcroft-Scott, Johnson and Chrissy Stamp requested that their votes in favour be recorded.

17.4. Note, the additional information requested has been included within this Cabinet report.

18. 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 external foster placements.	There is a recruitment strategy in place to recruit more Medway foster carers. The offer to foster carers is being reviewed to attract more carers to Medway. Development of a recruitment service to ensure assessments are timely and applicants are well supported	C2
Insufficient resources available to support placements	The Essex Fostering Review identified high caseloads for staff as a risk leading to a lack of support for placements, and potential to increase breakdowns. This is damaging to children in care.	Staffing in the service is being increased and additional support staff will give extra support to placements. Placement stability meetings are called as soon as any issues arise, and this area will be further strengthened.	C2

19. Consultation

- 19.1. Foster carers are regularly asked for feedback on various aspects of the service and will be fully consulted on the proposed changes to the payment scheme for carers.

20. Financial implications

- 20.1. The failure to secure sufficient in-house placements will result in more young people being placed in more expensive external placements creating further budget pressures on an already overspent placement budget.
- 20.2. Failure to develop the service will result in more foster carers resigning and further loss of in-house placements.
- 20.3. The report describes the progress of the fostering transformation programme but does not seek any further financial support as this will be reviewed as part of the 2021-22 budget setting process.

21. Legal implications

- 21.1. There are no legal implications of this report being presented to Cabinet.

22. Recommendations

- 22.1. The Cabinet is asked to consider the comments of the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee set out at section 17 of the report and note the Fostering Service Annual Report 2019-20.

23. Suggested reasons for decision

- 23.1. The National Minimum Standards for Fostering (2011) require that Fostering Agencies report the activity of the fostering service to its governing bodies.

Lead officer contact

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Fostering Service Structure Chart

Background papers

None