

Medway Parenting Support Strategy
2021-2031



Medway Parenting Support Strategy 2021 – 2031

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1) Foreword

Councillor Josie Iles, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services as Lead Member for Children's Services Medway Council

I am pleased to introduce the *Medway Parenting Support Strategy*. The timing of this strategy is paramount, as whilst the COVID pandemic has sadly seen many thousands of lives lost across the UK, there has also been an increase in the prevalence of issues that affect families, which many parents report has impacted upon their ability to support their children.

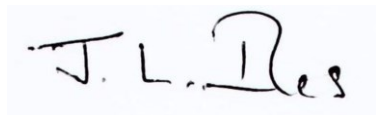
With that in mind, this exciting and ambitious 10-year plan sets out our aspiration to work collaboratively with Medway parents, carers and guardians* to develop high quality community-based parenting support services to ensure that every child in Medway gets the best start in life. This strategy sets out the vision and direction for developing and expanding parenting support over the next 10 years and will be realised through the creation of a delivery plan, co-produced with parents and key stakeholders. The vision is to empower whole families, working as equal partners, to safely make and sustain positive changes; to do this we will ensure that services are delivered at the right time and place, and that there is clear coordination of effort throughout Medway.

I believe focussing our actions and efforts on supporting parents across Medway will allow us to strengthen and improve the support we offer, remove some of the stigma parents might feel around seeking support and enable strong families across our communities. I know there are often barriers for parents in accessing the support they need, and this strategy aims to remove some of these barriers, promoting easy and inclusive access.

To bring this strategy to life, we have spoken to parents, carers, guardians and other stakeholders because we believe that the best strategies are coproduced through partnership working with our communities and stakeholders. These strong partnerships will allow us to support parents, whilst making best use of our resources so that we can provide a fair and graduated offer that represents good value for the public purse.

Evidence and experience tell us that parenting is the biggest single factor affecting children's wellbeing and development, yet we also know that children don't come with a handbook or set of instructions that tell parents how best to carry out their roles.

At a time when we begin to emerge from the COVID pandemic, I fully support this far-reaching strategy, and would encourage all partners to play an active role in its implementation and ongoing delivery.



2) Executive Summary

“Parenting is the biggest single factor affecting children’s wellbeing and development”
- Public Health England and the Local Government Association, 2016.

Parents are the single most significant influence on children’s emotional and physical well-being, educational attainment and behaviour. Evidence shows that supporting parents can reap significant benefits in outcomes for children and young people in the short, medium and longer term.

There are several drivers for this strategy including ‘Fair Society, Healthy Lives’ (UCL Institute of Health Equity, 2010), ‘Conception to Age 2: The Age of Opportunity’ (The Wave Trust, 2012) and ‘Building Great Britons’ (All Party Parliamentary Group for Conception to Age 2, 2015). These reports offer a wealth of evidence underpinning the importance of systematically supporting parents. Discussions with parents and stakeholders have identified key areas in which the system of support for parents and carers in Medway can be strengthened.

Medway has a younger population than nationally. In 2020 there were 64,391 children under the age of 18 years living in Medway. The parents, caregivers, guardians and wider networks of these children and young people all have their own characteristics, strengths and needs. This parenting support strategy outlines the current landscape and explains the need for support services across Medway.

At the time during which this strategy was developed, it was clear that there is work to do to understand the offers of support in place, as well as identifying the gaps, and duplication. The delivery plan aligned to this strategy will aim to shift what is a relatively unstructured landscape of services to a clear, needs-led and tailored suite of support services for all parents in Medway.

To do this, the Parenting Support Strategy strives to drive a cultural change across Medway, where parents, families and communities are empowered to create safe, caring, nurturing environments that enable children to thrive.

This parenting support strategy is for Medway the place, rather than for any individual organisation, team or group of people. It is for all families and parents supporting Medway’s children and young people and is also for schools and wider partners with a role in supporting parents.

Throughout much of the development of this strategy document, the world has been responding to the COVID 19 pandemic. Nationally, this has meant a number of ‘lockdowns’, periods of school closure, closures of local businesses and a significant change to the way services can be delivered and accessed. For some families, the pandemic will have been an opportunity to reconnect with one another and build bonds and relationships, whereas for many families we know that this has been an incredibly stressful time with relationship difficulties, new pressures such as home-schooling, and a significant reduction in natural support systems such as friends and family.

Whilst the long-term impact of the pandemic remains to be seen, it is important this strategy acknowledges the struggle many families will have experienced and aims to identify some steps that can be taken to address anticipated impacts.

Feedback from parents throughout the development of this strategy is that the increased use of digital platforms to deliver services and interventions is welcomed and carries benefits such as increasing accessibility. We have clearly heard that the delivery of support virtually must be balanced and when the time is right, this should form part of a blended model of delivery alongside face-to-face services, which are equally valued.

Support for parents in Medway is underpinned by principles of primary prevention. There is a graduated approach to targeted services support parents with particular needs or at a particular stage in the life course. Moving forwards, positive models of support and utilisation of peer support models will be further embedded.

To determine the success of the actions arising from the strategy, there are a number of expected outcomes:

- Short-term outcomes, such as parents and professionals knowing where and how to get the support they need
- Medium-term aims and outcomes, including positive feedback relating to services and improved parental confidence
- Long-term outcomes such as increased rates of school readiness and a reduction in children entering the care system

The strategy's delivery plan will show in greater detail the actions that will be undertaken to bring the strategy to life, and the roadmap for delivery and implementation. The delivery plan will be regularly critically reviewed to ensure the needs of parents and carers across Medway are being met.

3) Background to the Strategy

'Medway Children are thriving, healthy and learning well'

Welcome to Medway's Parenting Support Strategy¹, where we set out our vision to work in partnership with parents and carers to continue to improve experiences and outcomes for children, young people and families across Medway.

This strategy has been developed and co-produced with parents, carers, young people and partner organisations across Medway. It gives a broad overview of what we aim to achieve in Medway over the next ten years, based on consultations, national and local policy and national directives. This strategy supports and will work in conjunction with the Medway Children's Services Action Plan², the Medway Early Help Strategy and other key local strategy and policy documents.

The strategy will run for a ten-year period, with regular points of review throughout that time, and contains outcomes that will be measured over the short, medium and long terms. The strategy and ongoing engagement with stakeholders will form a basis from which we can improve the culture around supporting parents within Medway, by building on universal services and advice, and by strengthening systems of support when needs escalate.

a) Why we need a parenting support strategy

Most families within Medway are very able to provide the positive care that children need to thrive. However, parenting can be demanding and all parents require additional support from time to time. This strategy will help us to develop a sense of common purpose within Medway, to make sure that all parents and carers can access parenting support services that lead to positive experiences for them and their families.

It is the role of all agencies working with families to empower them to provide the best start for their children, building on the strengths that already exist within the family unit and their local communities. This strategy details the approach that partners in Medway adopt to work in partnership with parents to best support them.

In Medway, we aim to provide the next generation with the best chance to thrive and the skills to engage in positive parenting themselves. We want every family to develop an inter-generational cycle of positive parenting and relationships to help secure positive outcomes that are sustainable in the long term³.

Prevention and early help is about enhancing the capabilities of every parent/carer to provide a positive and supportive environment for children to grow up in. Providing coordinated, consistent and multi-agency family and parenting support is crucial in making sure that Medway families are safe, happy, secure, and can reach their full potential.

The Institute of Health Equity report that *'giving every child the best start in life is crucial to reducing health and welfare inequalities across the life course'*⁴. Successive national reviews have demonstrated the economic and social value of good and effective prevention and early

¹ [In the strategy, we use the term 'parenting support' to mean: 'Any activity or facility aimed at providing information, advice and support to parents, caregivers and guardians to help them in bringing up their children or children in their care'.](#)

² https://www.medway.gov.uk/downloads/file/4036/children_and_young_peoples_plan

³ <https://escr.ukri.org/news-events-and-publications/evidence-briefings/parenting-style-influences-child-development-and-social-mobility/#:~:text=A%20growing%20body%20of%20research,life%20can%20increase%20social%20mobility.>

⁴ <http://www.instituteoftheequity.org/resources-reports/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review>

help programmes and the critical place of high-quality community and universal support across health, education and voluntary sectors to prevent problems occurring.

There is no single guidance document or Act of Parliament that underpins the need for parental support services. Instead, there are requirements set out within numerous legislative areas and national priorities, that necessitate the provision of parenting support; some of these are explicit, such as the legislation underpinning Local Authority social care systems, whereas others are implicit – for example the NHS Long Term Plan commitments relating to a strong start in life for children and young people. This provides local areas with the scope to develop systems of parenting support that best suit their unique populations and provides the opportunity to provide parenting support service that best meet local needs.

There is a significant amount of research and evidence that outlines the importance of parents as the key factor in delivering positive outcomes for their children, as well as evidence supporting models of early intervention. Empowering parents to become sensitive and engaged caregivers is an enabling factor to develop secure attachments between a parent/carer and the child. This secure attachment forms the basis of the child's wider relationships and is a protective factor against adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) across the life course.

Some examples of research outlining the importance of parenting includes:

- 'Fair Society, Healthy Lives' (The Marmot Review), UCL Institute of Health Equity, 2010⁵
- 'Conception to Age 2: The Age of Opportunity' (The Wave Trust, 2012)⁶
- Early Intervention Foundation: What works to support parent child interaction in the early years (2016)⁷
- Building Great Britons: From Conception to Age 2 (First 1001 Days All Party Parliament Group, 2015)⁸

b) What are the key concerns that we are trying to address?

In the context of reducing public sector resources, it is crucial that we work together effectively and efficiently to support families at the earliest possible opportunity.

Throughout the development of the strategy, there have been opportunities to seek the feedback from and understand the experiences of parents in Medway.

Key concerns identified throughout the development of this strategy are:

- Universal layers of support should be strengthened, to ensure that all parents are empowered to do the best job possible, and that there is no consistent approach to how we help and guide parents in Medway
- Support is available to parents, but this is often fragmented and is uncoordinated and both parents and professionals are not always clear about how to access it
- Support is not always available at the right time and in the right places, and community-based assets within Medway are not always utilised to their full potential to increase access

⁵ <http://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review/fair-society-healthy-lives-full-report-pdf.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.wavetrust.org/conception-to-age-2-the-age-of-opportunity>

⁷ <https://www.eif.org.uk/report/foundations-for-life-what-works-to-support-parent-child-interaction-in-the-early-years>

⁸ <https://plct.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/building-great-britons-report-conception-to-age-2-feb-2015.pdf>

- Some parents with disabilities and/or additional needs feel that support for their own needs, or those of their children (who may be young carers), is not always timely or accessible.
- Parents often feel although there is stigma attached to reaching out and utilising support options, and they can be judged by peers for needing or accepting help, and the use of language in describing how support is provided is crucial in reducing this stigma
- There are some gaps in the support available for parents, particularly when they have children with diagnosed neurodevelopmental conditions
- A high proportion of referrals into specialist children's community health services for suspected neurodevelopmental conditions such as ADHD and autism are assessed without formal diagnosis being made as a result. This is an indication support should be made available to families earlier in the process, to ensure those that do not need formal assessment are able to manage the presenting needs of their children at the earliest point
- There are 'system delays' in accessing support, and in some cases a need for a neurodevelopmental diagnosis to access certain elements of the parental support offer. In addition, timeframes for formal support were not routinely shared with parents, and often little other support was identified during the waiting period.

Throughout the development of this strategy, we have consulted with parents and carers, as well as professionals and partner agencies across Medway. They have kindly shared their experiences on being a parent, supporting parents or working with parents across Medway, highlighting some of the things they found they needed help or support with. Parents explained some of the factors that prevent them from asking for help; some reflected back to us their experiences when they have asked for help. These conversations enabled us to better understand what parents, as well as partners more widely, think of the quality, quantity and accessibility of information and support available across Medway. Whilst much of the feedback was positive, it is apparent that some parents feel they are unable to get what they need when they need it.

c) What have parents across Medway told us?

Based on conversations in the development of this parenting support strategy, parents have told us that they would like:

- to have confidence in their skills and ability, and to be able to focus on their children's behaviours and emotional regulation
- to be able to access support in the management of relationships within the whole family
- the de-stigmatisation of accessing support from the universal offer through to the most complex needs, as well as improve access to support for all communities within Medway
- opportunities for them to give their children the best possible start in life

Recent school survey results

During the development of the strategy, a survey was undertaken with schools in relation to their role in supporting parents. This was completed by 83 schools (primary, secondary, special and PRUs) and 24 Early Years providers. Almost all respondents considered it a responsibility of their provision to provide support for parents, however there was much less clarity in their capacity to deliver this or their knowledge in where to access support for families. The survey also found that over 50% of the most common concerns raised with schools by parents related to routine and boundaries or general parenting, indicating that support should be bolstered in this area.

Support that is already offered to parents by schools in Medway includes:

- Opportunities to talk
- Advice and guidance into strategies and organisations that can support them in their role as parents
- Key person to contact in the interest of children
- Food parcels
- Supportive workshops and drop ins
- Child development advice
- Relationship advice
- Wellbeing checks
- Home visits
- Smoke Free Support
- Help to complete referrals and forms e.g. letters to housing
- Online safety guidance
- Return to work advice and support

Schools are key partners in our joint effort to improve support for families and outcomes for children, and we will ensure that developments in parenting support are undertaken in partnership with school leaders and support teams.

4) Context

Medway is an emerging city, set around the River Medway within the Thames Gateway Growth Area. There are 5 main towns in the area: Chatham, Gillingham, Rochester, Strood and Rainham, as well as significant rural areas.

In June 2020 the Office for National Statistics released the mid-2019 population estimates which indicated that the population of Medway was 278,556.

The majority of the population (89.6%) in Medway are classified as White, with the next largest ethnic group being Asian or Asian British (5.2%). This is similar to the England and Kent populations. Data from the 2019 school census shows that 72.4% of pupils in Medway were White British and 26.7% of pupils were of minority ethnic backgrounds. This may suggest a large change in the overall population distribution in Medway since the 2011 Census. Some wards are considerably more diverse than others. The three wards with the most ethnically diverse school populations are Chatham Central, Gillingham North, and Luton and Wayfield. Within these wards 51.6% to 57.9% of pupils are White British and at least 42.1% of pupils are of minority ethnic backgrounds.

Medway is ranked 93rd most deprived Local Authority of 317 in England in the latest indices (IMD2019).

Medway has a younger population than nationally, with proportionally more younger people and working-age residents and fewer older people. Medway has a younger median age of population at 38 years compared to 40 years for the UK.

Overall, comparing local indicators with England averages, the health and wellbeing of children in Medway is similar to England.

Public health interventions can improve child health at a local level. In Medway:

- The infant mortality rate is similar to England with an average of 13 infants dying before age 1 each year.
- The teenage pregnancy rate is similar to England, with 110 girls becoming pregnant in a year.
- 15.2% of women smoke at the time of delivery, which is worse than England.
- 71.5% of new-borns received breast milk as their first feed.
- The MMR immunisation level does not meet recommended coverage (95%). By age 2, 90.9% of children have had one dose.
- Dental health is similar to England. 25.5% of 5-year-olds have experience of dental decay.
- 11.6% of children in Reception and 22.2% of children in Year 6 are obese.
- The rate of child inpatient admissions for mental health conditions at 69.3 per 100,000 is similar to England. The rate of self-harm (10-24 years) at 365.4 per 100,000 is lower than England.

Educationally, 73.7% of children have achieved a good level of development at the end of Reception (higher than England). However, GCSE attainment is below the England rate.

The level of child poverty varies across wards, but the overall Medway rate is similar to England with 18.8% of children living in poverty. The rate of family homelessness however is higher compared to the England average.

In 2019, there were 64,979 children under the age of 18 years living in Medway. These children were all individual with different characteristics, strengths and needs. Diagram 1 below provides a summary of some of these

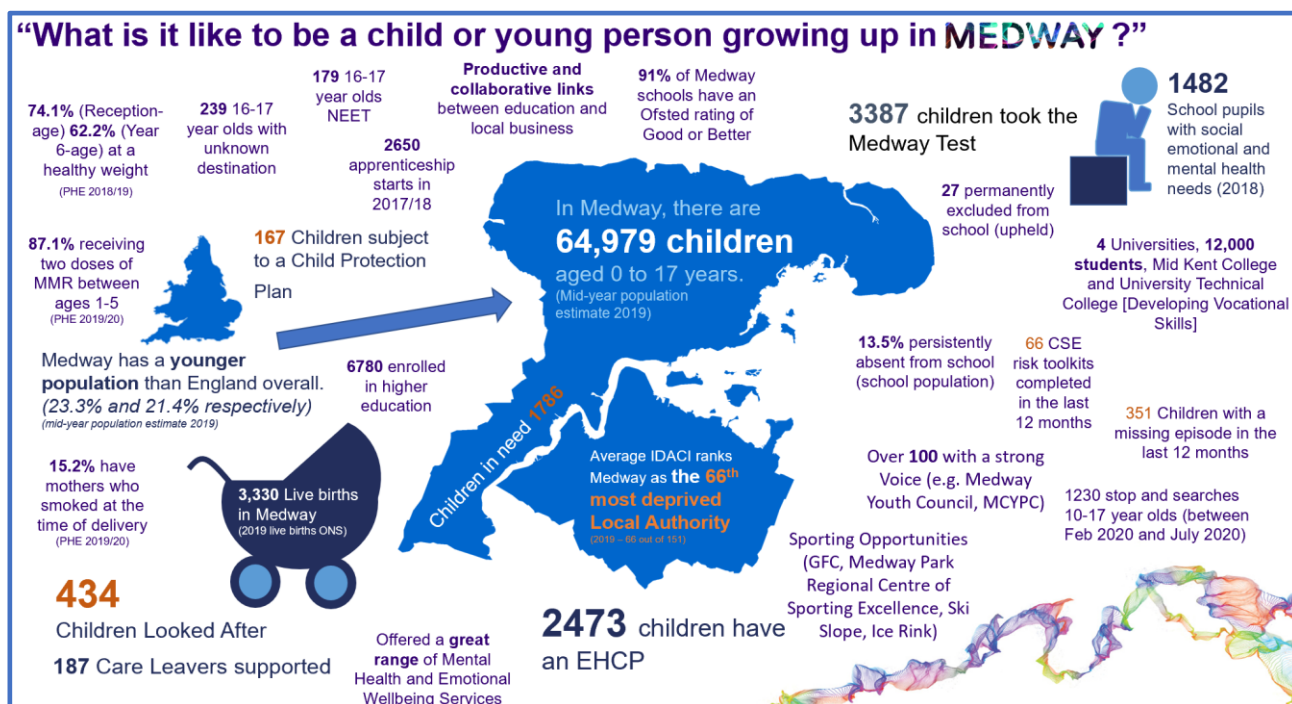


Diagram 1

5) Current landscape of parental support services

At the time during which this strategy is being developed, there is a relatively unstructured landscape of services that support parents in Medway.

Schools provide significant levels of support to children and work alongside parents throughout the routine course of their work, and joint working with schools is explored more in section 12c below.

The offer of support available to parents comprises services directly commissioned by Medway Council and NHS Kent and Medway CCG, services directly provided by Medway Council, and services provided by other organisations such as, those in the voluntary sector.

Options of support for parents span a wide spectrum of subject areas and needs. Universal health services such as midwifery and health visiting play an important role in supporting parents with babies and young children, as do services provided by Medway Council's Early Help Service. There are a number of services commissioned by Medway Council and NHS Kent and Medway CCG which scaffold onto this foundation of support, such as parent education, sleep and social prescribing services provided by Medway Community Healthcare.

Where additional help is required, the Early Help team within Medway Council provides support to parents, including delivery of structured parenting programmes, and there are many services that work alongside parents to provide support.

Throughout the development of this strategy, work has commenced to fully map the existing services that are available. A priority within the action plan that underpins this strategy will be to complete this mapping and to ensure the broad offer of support is developed in such a way as to meet the needs that have been identified, and to ensure the full service offer is effectively communicated to families and professionals.

6) Vision and Principles

a) A Vision for Medway

This Parenting Support Strategy strives to drive a cultural change across Medway, where parents, families and communities are empowered to create safe, caring, nurturing environments that enable children to thrive.

We see support for parents as a key component in the early help agenda and share the vision with Medway Council's Early Help strategy ***to empower whole families, working as equal partners, to safely make and sustain positive changes.***

b) Principles of Medway's Parenting Support Services

The following principles have been identified as being core to Medway's parenting support services:

Inclusive - Parenting services are for everyone and must be considerate of ethnic, cultural, religious and socio-economic backgrounds.

Co-produced - Parents, Carers, Children and Young People will be involved in the design and delivery of services.

Choice - Offer a broad range and choice of services to allow parents and practitioners to determine what services are most appropriate for their personal circumstances.

Timely – Services should be accessed as and when parents need them, at the right time in their individual journey

Access – Parents have a right to expect swift and easy access to support

7) Who is this strategy for?

This parenting support strategy is for Medway the place, rather than for any individual organisation, team or group of people. It is for all families and parents supporting Medway's children and young people and is also for schools and wider partners with a role in supporting parents.

The strategy takes a population health approach across the Council, NHS and other public services to improve physical and mental health outcomes, promote wellbeing, and reduce inequalities across Medway. This will build upon the role of the Kent and Medway Integrated Care Partnership as being the lead in population health management across Kent.

8) Links to other work going on across Kent and Medway

The development of effective systems of support for parents directly links to several key strategic drivers at a local level across Medway, as well as some whole systems changes and partnership working that cover both Kent and Medway. These include:

- Medway Council's strategic priorities, particularly in relation to "Supporting Medway's people to realise their potential".
- The vision of the Medway Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2018-2023⁹– Theme 1: Giving Every Child a Good Start
- The NHS Kent and Medway CCG five-year strategy, which commits to make sure children, young people and adults with special educational needs and disabilities, learning disabilities and autism - and their families and carers - receive the care and support they need and deserve
- Medway has an aspiration to become a Child-Friendly City, putting our young people at the heart of everything we do
- The development of the Kent and Medway Learning Disability and Autism strategy, to ensure that parents with LDA are effectively supported
- The Local transformation plan for CYP emotional wellbeing and mental health, which includes the following key areas:
 - identifying and providing support for children and young people at greatest risk,
 - reviewing support for children and young people with neurodevelopmental need or learning difficulties,
 - improving transition and increasing the support available to young adults,
 - increasing investment in early intervention and prevention support

In addition to the key drivers identified above, there are a number of local strategies and approaches which are dependent upon the role of parents for their success. These include, but are not limited to:

- Early Help Strategy
- Looked After Children Strategy
- Safeguarding Children Procedures
- Sufficiency Strategy for Children on the Edge of Care, Children in Care and Care Leavers
- Infant Feeding Strategy
- Youth Justice Partnership Strategic Plan
- Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Strategy

⁹ https://www.medway.gov.uk/downloads/file/3710/joint_health_and_wellbeing_strategy_2018_to_2023

There are a number of key areas of work within Medway, which have strong and direct links to parenting, and the strategy and delivery plan will ensure that there is close alignment between these programmes and support services for parents. Key areas of work to which Medway's parenting support work will directly link are outlined below:

a) Children and young People's Mental Health & Emotional Well-Being Services

There is a significant body of work taking place to improve mental health and emotional well-being support to children and young people in Medway, as outlined in the Local Transformation Plan (LTP).

This is a detailed plan, identifying the key areas of focus for improving outcomes for children and young people. Across all areas of development, commissioners are working to ensure that services are optimally designed to provide the best support possible to parents.

The areas of focus within the LTP include, but are not limited to:

- A focus on suicide prevention
- Improving services and support for young offenders
- Service provision and development, including online wellbeing services
- Self-Harm Programme, linking with initiatives across Kent
- A programme of mental health training for foster carers
- Work with schools including the "Link Programme" and Mental Health Support Teams in School
- Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) training delivered by Medway Education Psychology Team
- Mental Health Children and Young People Participation
- Communications campaigns relating to mental well being
- Youth Mental Health First Aid –training for practitioners
- Specific additional family support services where there is a child with a neurodevelopmental condition

b) Mental Health Support Teams (MHST)

Mental Health Support Teams (MHST) are a service designed to support mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in and around schools and colleges. The teams were described in transforming children and young people's mental health provision: A Green Paper, and they are a key element of the ambitions set out in the NHS Long Term Plan.

In November 2020, two MHST's started their training year to build a Medway service alongside pre-existing emotional wellbeing services to expand the offer available to Medway's children, young people and their families.

These teams will link with parents throughout the course of their work, to develop and embed strategies that support the emotional wellbeing of children and to ensure consistency of approach in home and school settings.

c) Early Help Strategy Development

The Early Help (EH) Service is developing a vision and strategy for Early Help across Medway. This work is being co-produced with a wide range of stakeholders and has incorporated interactive workshops and collaborative events.

The Strategy has a focus on Early Help for families being everyone's responsibility, whilst identifying ways to ensure that families and professionals are aware of the universal and more specialist services available to them, as and when they need them.

The strategy is also advocating a collaborative support approach to ensure professional networks offer coordinated information, advice and targeted support for families at the earliest opportunity.

d) Sufficiency Strategy for Children on the Edge of Care, Children in Care and Care Leavers

The fundamental emphasis of the Sufficiency Strategy is to reorient our support to improve the ability of families to look after their children within the community and reduce the need for statutory services. The priorities within the strategy link closely to the role of parenting support, and are to:

- Seek to improve family resilience and the ability of families to care for their own children through early intervention
- Reduce the need for repeated removals of children into care
- Facilitate children safely returning home
- Facilitate children leaving care to other permanent families
- Improve the number of in-house foster carers in Medway and their capacity to take on more complex or hard to place children
- Promote specialist high intensity support for complex children in care within Kent and Medway
- Create time and space to assess the needs of children in care and ensure that placements and support meet those needs to avoid repeated breakdowns and escalating need
- Improve the range and quality of accommodation for our care leavers within Medway

e) Positive Behaviour Support (PBS)

The overall aim of PBS is to improve the quality of life for individuals with learning disabilities and/or autism as well as their families/ care providers. It's a proactive and preventative person-centred approach, focusing on teaching new skills to replace behaviours that challenge, seeking to understand the reason for that behaviour so that unmet needs can be met. PBS is intended as a preventative approach and is better applied when an individual has not yet reached crisis point.

The majority of evidence for PBS is around individuals with learning disabilities and/or autism but has been and can also be applied to those without additional needs. Currently, PBS within Medway focusses around individuals with learning disabilities, autism and complex needs but trained practitioners may also utilise for those without additional needs. Furthermore, the EU pilot utilises PBS as a schoolwide approach as opposed to focussing on those with additional needs.

It is anticipated that as PBS develops throughout Medway, training and guidance will be widely offered, to ensure consistency of behaviour support approaches.

In addition, an expert practitioner network is now established, comprising of staff who have completed the specialist practitioner training.

f) Supporting Parents with Mental Health Needs

NHS Kent and Medway CCG has a vision that Medway will be a place where individuals are supported to have good mental wellbeing, where people know how to look after their own mental wellbeing and where to go for support when they are experiencing difficulties.

The Increase Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) national programme was launched in 2008, with the aim to provide universal primary care psychological therapy for people suffering from mild to moderate mental health disorders, such as depression and anxiety. The aim is to relieve distress and transform lives by offering NICE approved interventions such as counselling and cognitive behavioural therapy.

The voluntary sector plays a major role in supporting mental health patients at every stage of their journey, including when they are in crisis. A team of care navigators are in place in Medway to offer social prescribing for mental health so people receive the support they need early on before they go into crisis; we will ensure that links to community-based mental health services that can be accessed by parents are clearly communicated to parents and practitioners.

g) Perinatal Mental Health Service Development

The Specialist Community Perinatal Mental Health Services working in Kent and Medway are currently undergoing transformation to deliver the NHS Long Term Plan ambitions. These include:

- Increasing access for women and families to the specialist community perinatal mental health service. This service is a large multi-disciplinary team containing nursery nurses, peer supporters, psychologists, psychiatrists, occupational therapists and assistants and nursing staff offering a range of interventions for those with moderate to severe perinatal mental health needs.
- Providing increased psychological interventions – these include parent child video interaction guidance to support the building of attachment and communication skills.
- Increasing service delivery for an additional 12 months so that services are offered from pre-conception to 24 months after the birth of a child.
- Partner assessment and signposting services – offering partners of those accessing the specialist services assessment for their own mental health needs and referral on to appropriate services as required.
- The creation of a Maternal Mental Health Service – this focuses on psychological interventions for birth loss and/or trauma as a result of the maternity experience.

All service pathways have been co-designed and co-produced with those who have lived experience including partners.

In addition, the specialist community perinatal mental health services are supporting the PATH (PerinAtal menTal Health) project which is an EU funded project which will enable women, families and health care professionals to prevent, diagnose and successfully manage mild and moderate perinatal mental health issues.

PATH will enable parents, wider family, employers and healthcare professionals to find support and information to help with the parenting journey. PATH aims to promote positive parenting experiences and enable parents to feel confident in seeking self-help or professional support, leading to happier and healthier families. This cross-border initiative involves 13 partners from France, Belgium, the Netherlands and the UK.

h) Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Progress

There have been significant developments for children and young people with SEND in Medway in recent years. In 2019, Medway developed a revised strategy to improve outcomes for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities¹⁰.

The implementation of this strategy, and improvements that have been driven by recent joint inspections of the local area's arrangements for SEND, have a direct relationship to the support that is offered to parents across Medway.

Through links with parents of children and young people with SEND in Medway, we will build on the work that has commenced to coproduce services to support parents in the best possible ways.

i) Oral health for children and young people

Poor dental health impacts not just on the individual's health but also their wellbeing and that of their family. Children who have toothache or who need treatment may have pain, infections and difficulties with eating, sleeping and socialising.

The Medway Smiles Dental Passport given to new parents, promotes regular dental attendance from six months of age

Tooth decay is largely preventable, yet it remains a serious problem. Findings from Public Health England's (PHE) 2019 National Dental Epidemiology Survey demonstrated that 23.5% of 5-year-olds in England experienced tooth decay in one or more teeth; typically, 3 or 4 teeth are affected. The majority of the decay is untreated and will cause pain. Medway 5-year-olds showed a higher incidence of 25.5% which is above the England average and an increase of 4% from 2017 figures¹¹. Tooth extraction under General Anaesthetic, was the sixth most common procedure in hospital for children under 5 years of age, and it was the most common reason for hospital admission for children aged 5 to 9 years old

The Medway Oral Health Strategy launched on 21st April 2021 with partners from different organisations joining to make a difference to the oral health of Medway residents

j) Nutrition, physical exercise and weight management

Obesity continues to be one of the most complex and serious public health challenges in England. The National child measurement programme shows Medway remains above the national average for overweight and obesity in both Reception Year and Year 6, with 24.9% and 36.8% (2019/20) respectively. The Foresight Report (2007) identified that the causes of obesity are extremely complex, encompassing biology, environment and profound inequalities by gender, ethnicity, socio economic status, geography, and disability.

Across Medway there are a wide range of initiatives and programmes to support parents and childcare settings/schools to support children and young people to access healthy and nutritious food, support a healthy weight. These include:

- The Healthy Early Years (HEY) Award
- Tri Club children's and young people's weight management programmes
- Medway Healthy Weight Network
- Medway Whole Systems Obesity dashboard
- Medway Food Partnership

¹⁰https://www.medway.gov.uk/downloads/file/4653/medway_strategy_for_children_and_young_people_with_special_educational_needs_or_disabilities_send_2019_to_2022

¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-matters-child-dental-health/health-matters-child-dental-health>

- Tri Cookery courses for families with school-aged children

It is widely acknowledged that being physically active has a positive effect on the physical and mental health of children and young people (PHE and Sport England, 2019).

The UK Chief Medical Officer recommends that children do at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity every day, yet just 20% of boys and even fewer girls (14%), are meeting this target, despite 95% of children saying that they enjoy being active (PHE and Sport England, 2019). The latest national evidence from Sport England's strategy 'Uniting the Movement' 2021 reports that children and young people who are more active have more confidence, higher self-esteem, less anxiety and stress and better social skills. Positive attitudes towards physical activity have also been associated with children being happier, which largely stems from parents and caregivers, who shape their children's' attitudes and behaviours towards physical activity.^{12 13 14}

Across Medway there are a wide range of initiatives and programmes to support parents and childcare settings/schools to support children and young people to access healthy and nutritious food and to be physically active. This includes the Medway and Swale Physical Activity Alliance.

9) The impact of COVID-19

Throughout much of the development of this strategy document, the world has been responding to the COVID 19 pandemic. Nationally, this has meant a number of 'lockdowns', periods of school closure, closures of local businesses and a significant change to the way services can be delivered and accessed.

For some families, the pandemic will have been an opportunity to reconnect with one another and build bonds and relationships, whereas for many families we know that this has been an incredibly stressful time with relationship difficulties, new pressures such as home-schooling, and a significant reduction in natural support systems such as friends and family.

Whilst the long-term impact of the pandemic remains to be seen, it is acknowledged that many families will have struggled under significant pressure during the COVID pandemic. This strategy, and in particular the priority actions, aims work towards the development of a system that can meet the emerging needs of families throughout the COVID recovery period.

a) Impact on parents

While staying at home due to coronavirus, parents and carers have been worried about their children's development and the effect of missing school or nursery. No one expected parents to act as teachers, or to provide the activities and feedback that a school or nursery would¹⁵. Parents and carers have been expected do their best to help children and support their learning while dealing with other demands. Parents and carers have been supported by schools with specific advice on how education can continue at home, alongside work that children received from school and the development of more detailed online learning services.

Juggling the roles of parent, teacher, midday meal supervisor, cleaner and friend has been a tall order for many families, especially within the context of many parents continuing to work from home. Parents and carers have been creative in using online educational, social

¹² https://www.sportengland.org/know-your-audience/demographic-knowledge/children-and-young-people?section=at_a_glance

¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/physical-activity-helps-children-to-deal-with-life-s-challenges>

¹⁴ <https://www.sportengland.org/why-were-here/uniting-the-movement/what-well-do/positive-experiences-children-and-young-people>

¹⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/supporting-your-childrens-education-during-coronavirus-covid-19>

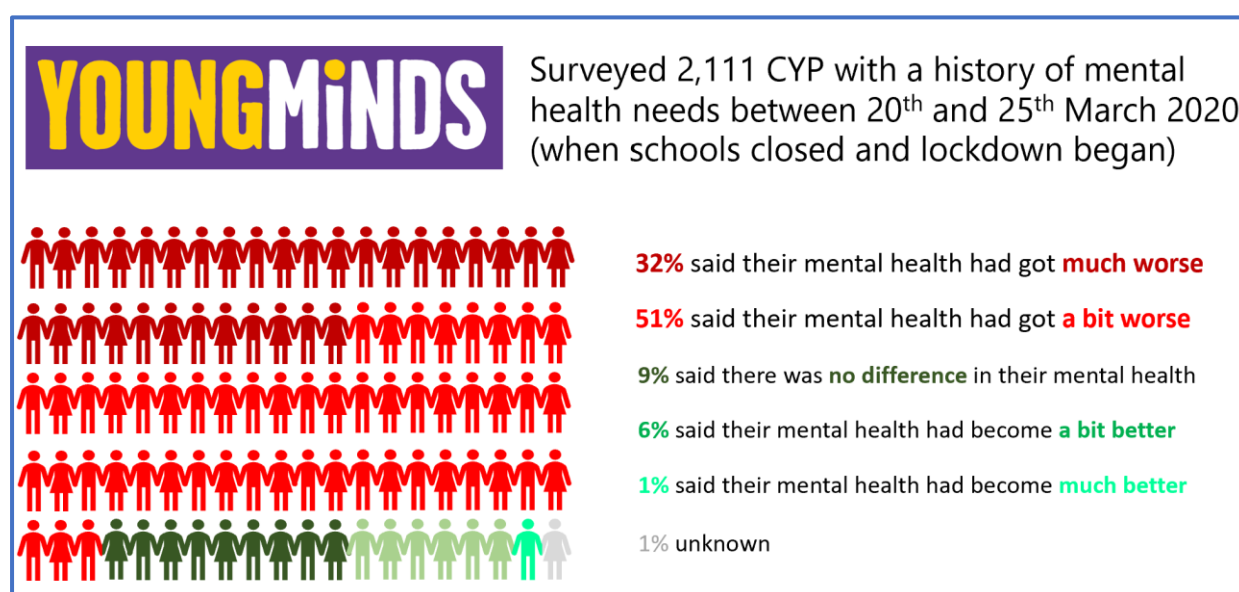
emotional and wellbeing resources, but many parents have also struggled to cope with the competing demands placed upon them, often in addition to concerns relating to their own work, financial and family situations throughout the pandemic.

There is a significant body of research and evidence emerging across Europe in relation to the impact of parenting distress on the emotional wellbeing of children and young people^{16,17,18}. In light of this, it is even more important that parents are supported and empowered to support their children.

There is a wealth of information available to Parents in terms of supporting children and young people during the COVID crisis, one of these is published by UNICEF¹⁹.

b) Impact on children and young people

There has been a well-documented increase in concerns relating to the emotional well-being and mental health of young people during the COVID pandemic²⁰. Key findings relating to the first national lockdown are identified below, alongside key risk factors for children and young people.



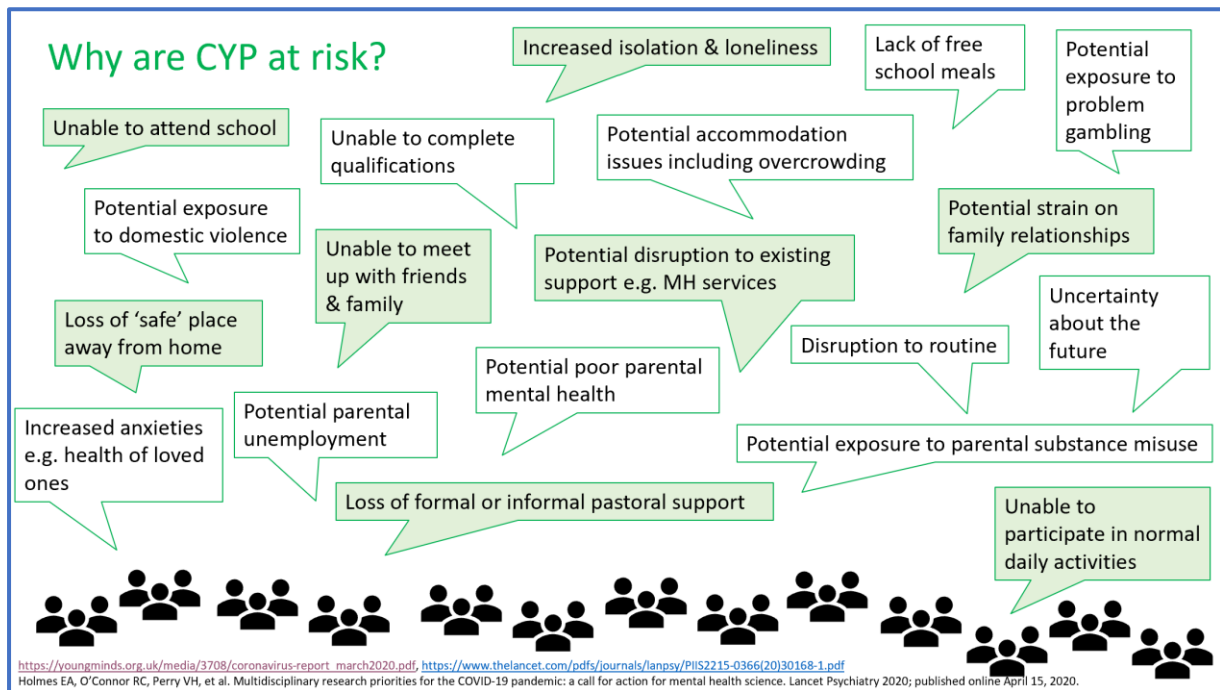
¹⁶ <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/effects-covid-19-families-time-child-development>

¹⁷ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/family/2020/08/11/covid-19-and-families/>

¹⁸ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/report-covid-19-children-young-people-families-september-2020-evidence-summary/pages/2/>

¹⁹ <https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/6-ways-parents-can-support-their-kids-through-coronavirus-covid-19>

²⁰ https://youngminds.org.uk/media/3708/coronavirus-report_march2020.pdf



On 7th January 2021 a report was presented to Medway Council's Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, outlining the impact of the COVID pandemic and lockdown on Medway's children and young people²¹.

As expected, the majority of the impacts identified by Medway's children and young people were negative. These included:

- around half reporting feeling more stressed and worried than normal (53%), experiencing worse sleep (48%) and undertaking less exercise than before lockdown (51%)
- most found it hard to cope with not seeing friends and family (74%), boredom (69%) and schoolwork (61%)
- Sub-analysis shows that negative experiences of lockdown increase with age, as support decreases, that girls were more likely to experience negative emotions during lockdown, and that those with SEN were more likely to need additional support.

In addition, although schools have worked hard to remain open throughout lockdown to ensure education places for vulnerable and key worker children, the impact of school closures and home learning for large portions of the population throughout the COVID pandemic may not be seen for some time. For many children, school is a place of sanctuary and routine, and it is not possible to replicate the support that children and families would normally receive via a system of home and online learning.

10) Wider impacts influencing families

Whilst the COVID pandemic has seen many thousands of lives lost across the UK, there has also been an increase in the prevalence of issues that affect families, which has affected the ability of parents to support their children in some cases.

²¹ <file:///C:/Users/michael.griffiths/OneDrive%20-%20Medway%20Council/Public%20reports%20pack%2007012021%201830%20Children%20and%20Young%20People%20Overview%20and%20Scrutiny%20Committee.pdf>

One consequence of this has been an increase in domestic abuse referrals. More positive impacts have seen families and communities working and supporting one another in an unprecedented way throughout this time of crisis.

Health services have been significantly impacted throughout the COVID pandemic, and the longer-term impacts of this are yet to be seen. Some children's health services have been disrupted, causing further anxiety and concern for children and families. As the pandemic progresses, local health services are recovering, and we will continue to monitor the impacts on children and families.

11) The importance of delivering services digitally, and of digital inclusion

Feedback from parents throughout the development of this strategy is that the increased use of digital platforms to deliver services and interventions is welcomed and carries benefits such as increasing accessibility. We have clearly heard the delivery of support virtually must be balanced and when the time is right, this should form part of a blended model of delivery alongside face-to-face services, which are equally valued.

As with all service delivery models, some parents will face barriers in accessing services that are delivered digitally. According to the Office for National Statistics, in 2019 there were 4.8 million adults in the UK, or 9% of the adult UK population, who had either never used the internet or not used it in the last three months²².

A recent survey led by Medway Council and Kent County Council²³ identified that one third of all respondents reported having some difficulty with their access to digital device(s)/smartphone(s) and/or internet access, while two thirds reported no difficulty. The main reason for difficulties in accessing digital services was reported to relate to costs – both in terms of the cost of devices and the costs of the data required to access the internet.

Key recommendations from the Kent and Medway survey report regarding service changes were:

- Staff need to be confident and comfortable in the digital engagement with service-users. Workforce development is necessary, to make sure that staff have the right skills to support the service-users who might not be as confident and comfortable digitally.
- Services need to actively promote digital engagement, clearly stating its benefits and opportunities. Staff need to encourage and notify service-users about the different pathways of accessing services. A cultural change amongst service-users is necessary, as the traditional way of engaging is changing. Service-users need to be guided and encouraged by our staff during this change.
- Digital engagement with service-users should be straight forward and user friendly. Clear guidance and support need to be available for service-users, to support them to have a positive experience of using digital tools to connect with health and social care professionals.

²² Office for National Statistics. (2019). Exploring the UK's digital divide. Retrieved from <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/articles/exploringtheuksdigitaldivide/2019-03-04>

²³ 'Understanding digital inclusion in Kent and Medway'; Kent County Council; Medway Council; NHS Partners January 2021

The action plan that will be developed to implement this strategy will ensure the provision of services is structured in such a way as to achieve an appropriate blend of face to face and digital delivery and will link to wider work across Medway to improve digital inclusion.

12) Our common approach to supporting parents

To support Parents across Medway, we will continue to embed a strong Universal offer, with a graduated approach through targeted and specialist services, to enable parents to access the right level of support at the right time for them.

a) Universal offer

Medway offers parents a suite of support services that can be accessed as and when parents need them. These are known as 'Universal' services. These services do not usually require a referral from a health or early help professional and many parents will find these services provide the additional support they require. These include services such as:

- Midwifery services
- Health Visitors
- School Nurses
- Medway Council's Early Help services
- Healthy weight services
- Oral Health services
- Child Health programmes facilitated by Medway Public Health Teams²⁴

There are plans to continue to broaden these Universal offers to include:

- Virtual media to give provide parents and professionals with strategies to manage difficult behaviour in children and young people
- Use of Social Media to share information, advice and support for parents/carers on personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education
- Development of peer-to-peer support programmes to enable families to support one another, as experts by experience

b) Graduated approach to increasing need (proportionate universalism)

In Medway, we want to ensure that there is a common approach to supporting parents that is derived from the principles that stakeholders have determined.

A core principle of our parenting support strategy is that services should be delivered in a timely way, to meet the individual needs of parents. To achieve this, we will ensure that the offer of universal services is supplemented by additional services that can provide differentiated support when it is required.

This will utilise the broad range of services in place within Medway and will necessitate adapting service delivery to meet specific needs in some cases. These may include:

- Targeted Parenting Support for Care Leavers who are parents themselves
- Specialist support for Foster Carers
- Support for children and families where a neurodevelopmental condition has been diagnosed (including pre-diagnostic support)

²⁴ <https://www.medway.gov.uk/childhealth>

- Support for families where children and young people are known to Youth Offending Services
- Support for families where the parent has a disability/additional needs of their own and/or children are young carers for their parents.

We will ensure parents and professionals understand how services fit together as a system that functions across a continuum of need and will communicate this clearly so that a graduated approach can be implemented.

c) Working in partnership with schools in Medway

Schools have an enormous influence on the development, health and well-being of children and young people and work in partnership with parents and allied services to ensure that there is consistency of approach in the key areas of a child's life.

Joint working with schools to support parents is well established within Medway, with specific teams working alongside schools and parents on key issues such as reducing exclusions and improving attendance, as well as offering advice and guidance relating to the individual needs of specific children and young people.

In Medway, we are developing a document with schools and for parents, outlining the services and interventions that should be ordinarily available for all children and young people. This will include services that are delivered directly by schools and those that are delivered in partnership with other services and will outline the expectation that schools and parents should work together to support issues such as a child's well-being or behaviour.

Specific training is available to help Medway schools provide consistent advice and guidance to children and parents, and this will be refreshed on a regular basis. In addition, many schools directly commission bespoke packages of training to meet their specific needs.

d) The development of peer support approaches

Families and communities play a key role in managing their own health and wellbeing. Peer support involves people sharing knowledge, experience or practical help with each other, often becoming what is sometimes referred to as an 'expert by experience'. Many voluntary and community groups already support and encourage peer support.

A summary of the evidence on peer support in 2015²⁵ found the most promising types of peer support appear to be:

- face-to-face groups run by trained peers which focus on emotional support, sharing experiences, practical activities and education
- one-to-one support offered face-to-face or by telephone
- online forums, particularly for improving knowledge and anxiety
- support offered regularly (such as weekly) for three to six months

Across Medway we will ensure peer support systems for parents are researched, developed, and supported.

13) What will success look like?

Family and parenting support is a core part of our work with families in Medway and is vital in tackling the inequalities caused by wider issues such as poverty. Improving outcomes for families and parents is one of the driving forces of this strategy, along with the education and

²⁵ <https://www.nationalvoices.org.uk/publications/our-publications/peer-support>

empowerment of parents and carers to enhance and implement their parenting skills to support better outcomes for children.

To determine whether this strategy is delivering improvements, we have established a set of outcomes. These were outlined by the multi-agency group that led the development of this strategy and have been refined through further discussion.

The parenting support delivery plan that will be developed to sit alongside this strategy, and the process of strategy review, will ensure these outcomes are measured and refined as appropriate. This will include benchmarking of outcome measures during the initial stages of the strategy implementation, to ensure the effective measurability of outcomes attached to the strategy.

a) Short term outcomes

- Parents and professionals know where and how to get the support they need
- Parents can access services easily
- Parents report stigma attached to seeking and receiving support is reduced
- Parents are able to access reliable information about child development, so they can identify when they may need to seek support

b) Medium term aims and outcomes

- Parents value the support they are receiving
- Parents feedback that support services meet their needs
- Improved parental confidence in relation to the demands of parenting
- Parents and children report things have changed positively
- Families are not referred to services repeatedly
- Increase in parental recommendations for support services to other parents
- Reduced referrals to neurodevelopmental service that do not result in formal diagnosis
- Reduced referrals for EHCP's that do not result in a having an EHCP plan developed

c) Long term aims and outcomes

- Increased rates of school readiness and improvement in educational attainment
- A reduction in referrals and re-referrals into statutory processes of social care
- Reduction in youth offending
- Reduction in school exclusions
- Positive changes in key public health indicators such as childhood obesity, smoking in pregnancy, drinking in pregnancy and domestic abuse
- Services are able offer more of a focus on proactive and preventative approaches
- Improved school attendance
- Reduction in people accessing substance misuse services
- Reduction in children entering the care system
- Reduction in people requiring specialist support from mental health services

14) Governance and oversight

a) Agreeing the strategy

The delivery of the strategy is not the responsibility of a single agency. It requires a partnership approach with a commitment from all stakeholders working with children and young people and their families. These include health, education, social care, schools and settings, voluntary and community organisations, and parents and carers.

The strategy will be presented to the Medway Safeguarding Children Partnership Executive for approval.

The strategy will be discussed via the respective governance routes of Medway Council and NHS Kent and Medway CCG, as key commissioning authorities. In addition, the strategy will be presented for discussion at the Medway Health and Well Being Board, which has representation from key stakeholders including service providers, education representatives, the voluntary sector and the Medway Parent Carer Forum.

b) Operational Oversight and Ongoing Review

Due to the close links with the Early Help Strategy, the operational oversight and delivery of the Parenting Support Strategy and the Early Help Strategy will be undertaken via the Medway's Early Help Partnership Board for both strategies.

In turn, this board reports to the Medway Safeguarding Children's Partnership Executive Board, who will oversee the respective strategies and delivery plan.

To ensure that the parenting support strategy remains current, the strategy and delivery plan will be regularly reviewed. These reviews will be scheduled via discussion with colleagues at the Medway Early Partnership Board.

15) A roadmap for implementation

The Medway Parenting Support Strategy will have an underpinning delivery plan. This plan will show in greater detail the actions that will be undertaken to bring the strategy to life, and the roadmap for delivery and implementation. Once developed, the delivery plan will be regularly critically reviewed to ensure the needs of parents and carers across Medway are being met.

It is likely that some elements of the delivery plan will require funding to enable projects to be launched and sustained. These funding requirements will be defined within the delivery / commissioning plans rather than within this document, which aims to provide the overarching strategic direction and priorities for the development of parenting support within Medway.

The priorities for 2021 to 2025 are summarised under these broad headings:

Priority	Domain	Lead Action
Priority 1	Engagement	Coproduce the Medway Parenting Support Strategy and action plan with parents and partner agencies across Medway
Priority 2	Bolstering Universal Interventions	Develop a rounded offer of parenting support, spanning universal and public health interventions, to ensure that all parents can access support at the earliest possible point of need
Priority 3	Targeted Support / Provider Engagement	Encourage and support schools and service providers to offer behaviour management strategies, advice and signposting as part of the provision that is ordinarily available to children and families.
Priority 4	Support for families with additional needs such as SEND	<p>Bolster the options of support for parents where there are additional needs, including pre- and post-diagnostic support services that can help when there are children and young people with neurodevelopmental conditions, physical ill health, and mental health and emotional well-being difficulties.</p> <p>This will also include support for families who have other parenting support needs, such as care leavers who are parents, families known to Youth Offending Services, families who have difficulties accessing services, and families where there is domestic abuse.</p>
Priority 5	Improve Information and Accessibility	Clearly communicate Medway's parenting support offer to parents and stakeholders, utilising the Medway Local Offer and appropriate communications channels, and ensure that support for parents is available online and via a range of accessible locations.

16) Conclusion

During the writing of this Medway Parenting Support Strategy, it has become clear that there are a number of avenues of support for parents and families across Medway already in place. However, there is a need to improve and simplify access to these and provide new and innovative services to ensure that the varied support needs of parents across Medway are met. In the development of new services, we will listen to and work with parents and stakeholders, utilising their experience to shape service development across Medway.

We aim to develop a menu of support options with pathways that are understood by parents and professionals, facilitating easy and natural access to services at the earliest point of need, while building local community resilience.

The development and implementation of this strategy constitutes a renewed focus on the importance of parenting support and can be the start of a cultural evolution within Medway where parents fully engage with support services as partners and without fear of judgement or stigmatisation.

17) Acknowledgements and Contributions

We wish to thank those parents, colleagues, and stakeholders whose assistance and guidance has been instrumental in this work.

Your help in identifying the priorities for parenting support in Medway has been invaluable, and your commitment to continue to work in partnership in this area moving forwards is greatly appreciated.