

CABINET

19 OCTOBER 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 children in care and establishes the work which should be undertaken in the coming year.

Please note this report is being presented earlier than in 2020 and details the work for the financial year April 2020 to March 2021. It was considered by the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee and their comments are set out in section 4.

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 April 2020 and March 2021. This Annual Report also sets out plans for future service development.
- 1.2. The Fostering Regulations 25.7 requires the executive side of the Local Authority or the independent foster service's provider/trustees, board members or management committee members to 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. 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 in care and care leavers' views and experiences inform current and future service delivery.
 - Improve the health and well-being of children and young people in care and care leavers.
 - Provide timely and high-quality interventions with partner agencies to help children remain living or return to their families, where appropriate.
- 3.2. 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 who are looked after by Medway, whether the arrangement is short or long term are cared for in loving, secure and stable families.
- 3.3. 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.

- 3.4. Figures published by Ofsted in December 2020, confirm that 65% of current carers are over the age of 55 years and 25% are over the age of 60 years, underlining the challenge that every local authority faces in finding and retaining sufficient carers with the right skills and experience, particularly for sibling groups, children with disabilities and teenagers. It also serves to highlight the potential difficulties in the future as these current carers reach retirement age.
- 3.5. Medway Fostering Service is actively responding to these challenges through the work of the Recruitment Team, which is now a distinct team within the service under a newly appointed manager. Within the team, there is a dedicated Recruitment and Marketing Officer who works closely with Medway's Communication and Marketing department to ensure a robust marketing strategy targets the recruitment of potential carers. This is further discussed in Section 6.
- 3.6. The pandemic has affected all aspects of the work of the Fostering Service and has challenged carers in different ways, in particular the need to become teachers as well as carers. Despite the challenges many carers were very creative throughout the year in engaging children and young people in new and innovative ways of learning. For example, one carer, who found her young person struggling with online learning, used their local beach to beachcomb and then complete a project and art from his treasures. On another occasion they turned the summer house into a Tea Room which meant the young person had to plan his business, write signs to 'sell' his produce and use maths skills for the costings. They also used the local woods for exercise and natural trails. This is just one example from many of the creativeness of carers during this challenging period.
- 3.7. The Fostering Service worked hard to keep the service going through the pandemic. Carers were kept 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 lockdowns. As lockdowns came and went, 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. Fostering Service Structure Chart

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

3.9. The Fostering Service

- 3.9.1. The structure of the fostering service has undergone several changes since the last annual report with increased investment in the service. The former structure of one large team encompassing recruitment and support under one manager gave too much responsibility to this manager in comparison with other managers at the same level in Children's services and did not provide sufficient focus on the individual elements of recruitment and support at managerial level.
- 3.9.2. The new structure creates 4 fostering teams under the Group Manager. One team covers recruitment and assessment of foster carers and supported lodgings providers with increased investment in assessing social workers and dedicated workers for supported lodgings and private fostering.
- 3.9.3. There are now 2 support teams working closely together to provide support and supervision to foster carers.
- 3.9.4. The 4th team is the Connected Carers Team who complete assessments of family and friends carers and provide Special Guardianship support. The work of this team is covered in Section 11.
- 3.9.5. The Recruitment Team are fully staffed with permanent workers except for the Supported Lodgings worker. This has been out to advert but a suitable candidate has not yet been identified.
- 3.9.6. The Therapeutic Support Teams have seen some changes in staffing and continue to see some volatility with staff leaving for a variety of reasons, including internal promotion.
- 3.9.7. The work of the Support Teams is supported by a Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer (FIRO) 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.
- 3.9.8. 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.
- 3.9.9. The Connected Carers team is also staffed by permanent workers. There have been some changes in staff in the last year, and the team are currently recruiting to one vacancy.
- 3.9.10. 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.

- 3.9.11. 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 the dedicated Children in Care service has enabled better communication and co-working for the benefit of looked after children and the Group Managers for Children in Care and Fostering meet weekly to promote this good communication.
- 3.9.12. 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.

3.10. Recruitment

- 3.10.1. Fostering recruitment remains the key priority across the Fostering Service for both foster carers and Supported Lodgings providers.
- 3.10.2. 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 challenging needs; and
 - Foster carers for Parent and Child placements.
- 3.10.3. 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.
- 3.10.4. 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 2020. 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.
- 3.10.5. These events have been advertised widely including Kent Messenger, weekly 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. Soon, all events will be advertised on the new fostering website, with quick registration enabled.
- 3.10.6. To be piloted from Sept-Dec 2021 will be extended enquiry hours with duty workers being available from 7pm-9pm Monday-Thursday, and then again Saturday mornings for calls and home visits. This is in an attempt to target

those applicants who don't have time to complete an in-depth application form during business hours and to increase the possibility of us meeting all family members early on in the enquiry process to engage them as much as possible, provide appropriate information to prospective secondary carers and birth children for them to have a clear understanding of their roles and contributions to fostering, and for us to gain an understanding of their expectations and any areas of development and support.

3.11. Advertising activity

- 3.11.1. 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.
- 3.11.2. The Recruitment and Marketing Strategy was updated in May 2021. We have commissioned monthly adverts on radio, and there is a regular Facebook post schedule in place that focuses on targeted content scheduled for each day of the week. Parameters are in place which track the journeys of visitors to our website, and now track the performance of our campaign and content, and Google AdWords have been used to help optimise the higher ranking on search engines. The Recruitment and Marketing Officer monitors Medway's position in terms of searches. We have increased in search appearances, coming up in one of every 4 searches on Google. We are now ranking the 3rd best out of all competitors, which means that we are in the space we want to be in to optimise our reach to potential new carers.
- 3.11.3. Recruitment and advertising messages to the wider market are set to capture:
- 1) those that are not thinking of becoming Foster Carers but can still help in our recruitment drive by sharing and liking Facebook content and our page, informing their networks of our free virtual events,
 - 2) priority groups; adolescents, 0-25 disabilities, sibling groups, P & C, Supported Lodgings providers.

3.12. Recruitment activity

3.12.1. Since April 2021 – July 2021, there have been:

- 6 households who have attended Skills to Foster
- 3 potential households booked on to the next Skills to Foster training in August 2021
- 4 at Stage 1 of assessment
- 4 at Stage 2 of assessment

3.12.2. Between April 2020 and March 2021, out of 9 potential transfer-ins from an IFA, only 2 transferred to Medway. Those that transferred did so because they already had a Medway child with them, and they were no longer happy with the agency who were becoming more business-like and less child

focussed. Of those who decided against transferring, 4 reported that the fees were too low and were also concerned about levels of support, 2 only wanted information and did not follow up and the final carer decided not to transfer after the placement of 2 children as they felt the timing would be disruptive.

- 3.12.3. Over a 4-year span, enquiry levels across the year have been monitored and recorded so campaigns can follow these peaks for effectiveness.
- 3.12.4. During the year April 2020 to March 2021, there were 7 approvals of new carers and from April 2021 to July 2021, there have been another 7 approvals so recruitment activity has increased, which is encouraging. The figures above also confirm that more carers are coming through assessment compared to last year. However given the numbers of carers resigning, further recruitment is needed to maintain numbers of carers. It is anticipated that the proposed new fee structure will further support recruitment.
- 3.12.5. The pandemic has affected fostering recruitment, as it has every other area of our lives, and many of those expressing an interest in fostering are considering this alongside other changes they might wish to make as a result of the pandemic. In order to potentially capitalise on those still considering fostering as a career, the team are sending regular newsletters and updates to those who have expressed an interest, thereby keeping their links open with Medway fostering.

3.13. Fostering Panel

- 3.13.1. 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.
- 3.13.2. 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.
- 3.13.3. 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 2020/21	25
New Panel members	5
Resignation from Panel	2
Cancelled panels due to not being quorate	0

3.13.4. 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 were made to the membership of the Fostering Panel including the appointment in October 2020 of a new Panel Chair. He brings a wealth of knowledge and experience of fostering. 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.

3.13.5. 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 was used on two occasions when panel members had difficulty joining because of technology constraints.

3.13.6. Summary of panel business, cases heard and categories

Form F (Approval of foster carers)	5 (including one updated Form F)
Form C (Full approval of connected carers as foster carers for specific child)	6
Change of Approval for foster carers	3
Permanent Match of child to carers	54
Standards of Care (concerns regarding care given to a child)	3 + 3 reviews of SOC
Variation of Approval of foster carer	2
Annual Review (first, third and supplementary report)	8
Termination of Approval	22
Change to the Usual Fostering Limit	0
Extension of Temporary Approval of connected carer	3
Change of Approval following Annual Review	7
Exemption (IFA)	0
Approval Review	2

- 3.13.7. Of particular note in terms of panel business during the last year has been the continuing 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.
- 3.13.8. One of the Standards of Care cases, which resulted in a decision to terminate approval, was appealed to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM), an independent panel outside of the local authority. This panel was split on whether the carers should be de-registered with a majority recommending continued approval. Medway Agency Decision Maker upheld his original decision and the carers were de-registered.
- 3.13.9. In the year 2020/21 we have had 23 carers leave Medway, which is a slight increase from 20 in the previous year.
- 3.13.10. Of these 23 carers, 2 were connected carers, where the child moved on, one returning to parents’ care and one to residential care. There were 4 de-registrations as a result of Standards of Care investigations, which is a considerable decrease on the previous year’s total of 9.
- 3.13.11. Of the remaining 17 carers, one transferred to an Independent Fostering Agency and one was approved by another local authority. This carer had a child from this authority in their care long term and had adopted the Medway children in their care so it was an appropriate transfer of responsibility.
- 3.13.12. The remaining 15 carers resigned from fostering for personal reasons, including 2 families who had been fostering for well in excess of 20 years each.
- 3.13.13. It is significant that we are not seeing high numbers of carers transferring to other agencies, rather carers are choosing to stop fostering completely. Conversations with some of the carers who resigned suggest that for some at least the pandemic played some part. For some of our older carers, there were concerns about the impact on their health and the risks of catching Covid with children and young people going in and out of the home. For others the pandemic has given them cause to re-evaluate their circumstances and they decided to resign from fostering as a result.
- 3.13.14. Training to Panel members has not been formally delivered during the period since the pandemic began although has been arranged for the Autumn when it is hoped it can be delivered face to face. 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.

3.14. Fostering Service Review

- 3.14.1. It has been recognised for some time that Medway's remuneration for foster carers is lower than neighbouring authorities and 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.
- 3.14.2. As a result of the fostering review from our Partners in Practice, Essex County Council, there has been a full review of the fostering service including the fees paid to our carers. The proposals for change were agreed by Cabinet at its meeting on 3 August 2021 and included a proposed increase in fees paid to carers as well as additional proposals to reward carers who are looking after children with disabilities and children with more complex needs and behaviours.
- 3.14.3. The service is also committed to ensuring that all Medway foster carers from the first point of contact are trained and supported to understand why children who have suffered trauma and have had poor early life experiences need to be parented therapeutically and to give them the skills and knowledge to do this. This is further discussed in Sections 15, 16, 17 and 18.

3.15. Connected Carers

- 3.15.1. 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 or young person. This area of activity continues to grow due to the expectation that all potential family and friends will be considered if a child cannot safely return home. There were 42 new Special Guardianship and Connected Carer assessments undertaken in the year, a decrease from 55 in the previous year. The reduction in number of assessments undertaken is thought to be as a result of the pandemic, which ties in with a reduction in referrals made to the Local Authority regarding concerns for children during periods when children were not attending school. Despite this decrease, this is an area of work that is likely to continue to grow and further legislation in this area is expected.
- 3.15.2. 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 87 Viability Assessments undertaken in the year, a very slight decrease from 89 in the previous year. The robustness of viability assessments continues to improve, with little over half progressing to further assessment.

- 3.15.3. There are times when a 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.
- 3.15.4. 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 Care", a bespoke version of the "Skills to Foster" training for generic carers. Medway are one of only a few authorities to offer this routinely to all connected carers and the feedback from carers has been very positive.
- 3.15.5. The team are also offering 'Attachment' and 'PACE Parenting' for prospective Special Guardians and Connected Carers to further enhance their knowledge and preparation for parenting children who have suffered trauma through their early life experiences. This will ensure that these carers receive a high level of training and preparation before the child joins their family. A support group is in place for existing and prospective carers and is well attended. The team also provides quarterly newsletters to carers. These measures are all designed to provide further support to these placements and reduce the risk of breakdown.
- 3.15.6. 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.
- 3.15.7. June 2020 saw the publication of 'Recommendations to achieve best practice in the child protection and family justice systems: Special Guardianship Orders'- Public Law Working Group. The guidance suggests that placements should be tested prior to final Orders, such as Special Guardianship Orders being granted, whilst the children are subject to Interim Care Orders, if the children are not already in the care of the prospective carers. Medway has embraced this guidance and all children are now placed with prospective carers prior to final Orders being granted,

whilst remaining subject to Interim Care Orders. This provides additional support and oversight as to how this arrangement is working in the short-term, which gives an indication of long-term placement stability. The President of the Family Division, Sir Andrew McFarlane, not only endorses this guidance, but states that this should now be applied in every case whereby an SGO is an option, in the hope that it will improve outcomes for children and carers.

- 3.15.8. Until this year Special Guardianship support had 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 has transferred 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.

3.16. Allegations/ Quality of Care/ Complaints

Allegations and Quality of Care Concerns

- 3.16.1. All allegations and quality of care concerns are fully explored and analysed to ensure all of our children are safeguarded and concerns are addressed. In total during the year, 3 carers were reported to LADO for investigation. Of these one resigned prior to a Standards of Care investigation. The other 2 were presented to panel and deregistered. In all of the cases reported to LADO, the concerns were substantiated.

Fostering Complaints

- 3.16.2. For the period of 2020/21 there was one complaint made by a parent about a foster carer and one made by former foster carers, now Special Guardians, about the Connected Carer Service. 3 foster carers who have all been de-registered because of concerns about standards of care have complained about the fostering and the Children in Care Service.

3.17. Placement and carer information

- 3.17.1. 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.
- 3.17.2. 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.

3.18. Demographics of children living with Medway Carers

Placements as at 31 Mar '21		Connected care	In-house foster care (% of fostered)
Age	Age 0	1	10 (38%)
	Aged 1- 4	3	29 (52%)
	Aged 5- 9	1	44 (53%)
	Aged 10-15	12	69 (49%)
	Aged 16-17	8	25 (50%)
Parent & child		0	3 (100%)
Gender	Female	12	89 (51%)
	Male	14	98 (46%)
Child with a disability		3	16 (64%)
Ethnicity	White	36	158 (48%)
	Asian/Asian British	0	5 (56%)
	Black/Black British	1	10 (50%)
	Mixed	4	14 (50%)
	Other Ethnic Groups	0	0 (0%)
	BME Total	5	29 (48%)

- 3.18.1. 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 – 31st March 2021. The percentages recorded reflect the percentage of all children in care of that age cohort who are in in-house placements. The figure for the youngest age cohort does not include those placed in fostering for adoption placements, hence the smaller percentage showing for this age group. Fostering for adoption is increasingly used where possible for this younger age group where children are placed with approved adopters who are also approved as foster carers.
- 3.18.2. 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 with disabilities and teenagers at risk of criminal and sexual exploitation. The fostering review has considered how we recognise the challenges of caring for these children in terms of financial reward and also support.
- 3.18.3. It is pleasing to note that all the Parent and Child requests were accommodated with in-house carers during the year as these are generally very expensive placements when sought externally. Medway has 18 trained Parent and Child carers, which is a high number although not all are available at any time to take these placements as some will have other placements.

3.19 Leaving Care services including Supported Lodgings

- 3.19.1. 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 and it is anticipated that the new Supported Lodgings worker will fulfil this role.
- 3.19.2. The Staying Put policy has been reviewed to also encourage more foster carers to offer this level of support to young people in placement and this is an area for development which has been recognised by government with additional funding being made available. The service will be working with the Independent Reviewing Officers to ensure that Staying Put is on the agenda for child in care reviews for every child after their 16th birthday to ensure this can be agreed where possible.

3.20. Placement stability and permanence

- 3.20.1. 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."

- 3.20.2. 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, and all are agreed that it appears that this placement can meet the child's needs into adulthood, a permanent match assessment is completed. This assessment considers the carers' ability to meet the child's needs now and into the future and identifies any support which might be needed for the placement.
- 3.20.3. Permanent Match assessments for all Medway children, whether in-house or external placements, are taken to Medway's Fostering Panel for recommendation then approved by the Agency Decision Maker. 54 permanent matches were taken this year, and more are scheduled into Panel business moving forward.
- 3.20.4. The number of children in long term stable placements, which is defined as longer than a year, continues to grow and stands at 127 in March 2021. For

82 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 31 Mar '21)	0 - 3 Mths	3 - 6 mths	6 - 12 mths	1 - 2 years	2+ years	Total
Friends & relatives	3	1	7	3	12	26
Foster care	23	17	35	42	78	195
Total	26	18	42	45	90	221

3.20.5. 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. While placement stability meetings do take place, they currently do not take place earlier enough to enable effective support to be put in place.

3.20.6. 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. To further support placement stability, the fostering service are adding to their available support through some additional posts. The service had one therapeutic support worker who worked intensively with families who needed additional support to help a child in placement. This post and an additional therapeutic support worker post have been recruited to and they will be joined by 2 additional posts called "Children's Champions". These workers will work with and support children in care but also the birth children of foster families. These children are an often-neglected group within the fostering network but are often crucial to the success of placements. These dedicated workers will add additional support to all placements but particularly those at risk of breakdown.

3.20.7. 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. These meetings are organised and chaired by the IRO service.

3.21. Placement Stability and the Hubs

3.21.1. Placements are being further supported by the development of our primary and adolescent hubs.

3.21.2. Research has shown that many of our young people leave the care system with mental health issues, and an inability to build secure relationships with

others. To assist our young people in relationship building, and helping them to build secure attachments, we identified the need for a therapeutic hub to build a fostering community around the young people that require the extra support.

- 3.21.3. The hub carers support a constellation of six fostering families, offering sleep overs once a month for two nights for each child, emergency support at times of crisis, play dates and intensive therapeutic support. We organise a coffee morning once a month for the constellation carers with the hub carers, we also organise a community event once a month to bring the families and young people together, which assists in building the fostering community and relationship building. Young people have intensive therapeutic work completed with them by staff and hub carers in both hubs.
- 3.21.4. The primary hub supports carers up to the age of 11 years. The primary hub carers slotted into a grandparent role with the younger children, taking them swimming, on bike rides, picnics in the park. They purchased a therapeutic colouring tablecloth which they all enjoy colouring during their visits. They have therapeutic story books to read to the young children at bedtime. Each young person has their own quilt cover and lamp shade to personalise their room for their stay. Through lock down, the hub carers continued to long arm support to the children and carers with socially distanced meetings, virtual game nights and calls and is now back up and running fully.
- 3.21.5. The Adolescent hub opened in June 2021, and the hub carers will be supporting a constellation of six fostering families and six young people. Their garden is like a sensory fairy ground for young people, they have a sensory shed with lights, sounds and water features, they own the woods at the back of their garden where our young adolescents can enjoy wood working tasks, crafts or just go and sit and enjoy the sensory area. Our hub carers keep chickens and are going to take the young people to choose a rescue chicken each, they will enjoy collecting their breakfast eggs from their chicken when they have their sleepovers.
- 3.21.6. Our male hub carer builds cars, and he also has an interest in bikes which he will share with our young people. He is a builder and will share his building knowledge if the young people show an interest.
- 3.21.7. The female carer loves arts and crafts, she has taken young people out collecting shells which are mounted on wood and displayed in the woods.
- 3.21.8. There is evidence from similar schemes nationally about the benefits to carers and children alike from this shared approach to supporting placements. There is evidence that it supports placement stability, and it strengthens the relationships between carers and children and young people, fostering services and birth families.

3.22. Foster Carer Learning & Development

Mandatory training

3.22.1. 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

3.22.2. 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 and “trauma informed parenting” courses. 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.

3.22.3. 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.

3.22.4. 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.

Personal Development Plans

- 3.22.5. Personal Development Plans (PDP) 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.
- 3.22.6. PDP's are considered at foster carers annual review meetings, and progress is considered and recognised in this forum.

Training

- 3.22.7. All approved foster carers must complete a TSD portfolio in their first year of fostering and all connected carers within 18 months.
- 3.22.8. The Fostering Service offers workshops to support carers in completing this portfolio, delivered by staff from within fostering.
- 3.22.9. As part of the fostering review, the current scheme for payments linked to training has been reviewed and it is proposed that this is linked in future to skills demonstrated by carers through their annual reviews and training completed.
- 3.22.10. 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 was again put on hold due to the pandemic. Some face to face training is planned for the autumn.

3.23. Support for carers, children and placements

Support groups

- 3.23.1. Support groups are offered monthly to foster carers and there is an expectation that all carers attend support groups to meet their registration requirements.
- 3.23.2. Following the first 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.
- 3.23.3. 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 there will be a mixture of virtual and face to face meetings.

Support

- 3.23.4. Medway Fostering Service offers mentoring and support to new carers throughout their first year. Carers are matched with an experienced foster carer who offers formal and informal support in understanding the fostering role. This service has also been offered when carers outside their first-year need support in managing a new task, such as moving children on to adoption.
- 3.23.5. 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.
- 3.23.6. A monthly newsletter is produced for carers, which contains all information relevant to the Service, ideas and suggestions, relevant research and legislation and upcoming training and opportunities. As mentioned earlier, we have also sent out a weekly email since the beginning of the pandemic with Covid and other 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.

Support for children

- 3.23.7. 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.
- 3.23.8. 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.
- 3.23.9. 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.

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

- 3.24.1. The Fostering Service had been developing the following areas of involvement and participation for children and young people through 2020 in addition to those mentioned above. Some have not reached fruition again due to the pandemic. The areas are:
- 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.

3.25. Service Developments 2021/22

- 3.25.1. 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.
- 3.25.2. The fostering review highlighted the need to make investment in the fostering service and in particular to increase the fees paid to our foster carers. Much of the work of the service in the next year will be to embed the changes following this review and to build on the progress already made.
- 3.25.3. The fostering service is developing a new website to promote the service and assist with recruitment as well as to provide a source of information to all our approved carers.
- 3.25.4. To further support our drive to ensure that all carers are parenting therapeutically and to support placement stability, the service will be embedding the new support roles into the work of the service. The training programme will be further enhanced and supported.
- 3.25.5. The fostering review has also identified roles for experienced carers to assist the work of the team by using their knowledge and expertise to support recruitment and to support new carers in the role and work will begin to recruit carers to the new roles.
- 3.25.6. The work on recruiting and supporting carers to care for children with disabilities is in its early stages and this will be further advanced during the next year. It is anticipated that if successful, we will be able to support children with very complex disabilities to remain with their birth families for longer periods and so reduce the need to provide residential care. The connected carer team have made huge changes in the support and training

offered to Special Guardianship carers in the last year. This support will be further developed during the next year.

4. Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

- 4.1. The Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the report at its meeting on 30 September and its comments are set out as follows:
- 4.2. The Head of Corporate Parenting introduced the report which set out the work completed by the service over the period April 2020 – 31 March 2021. He took the opportunity to recognise the hard work and commitment of Medway's Foster Carers over what had been an incredibly challenging time due to the Covid-19 pandemic. He also drew Members' attention to the review of the service, recruitment, training and development. He added that Medway was one of very few authorities that had a clear training offer for connected carers and that the service was currently piloting an enhanced out of hours service between 7-9pm, which would be further developed if well received.
- 4.3. Members then raised a number of questions and comments, which included:
 - Foster to adopt – Officers confirmed that information about this would be covered comprehensively in the annual adoption service report.
 - Retirement trends – in response to a question about the 22 Foster Carers who had chosen to end their services officers confirmed that some Foster Carers were retiring from the service and an event to celebrate their service was being held in October.
 - Demographics – officers confirmed that the demographics of the foster carers, particularly with 65% being over the age of 55, matched the national picture and the service were working hard to attract a range of carers, including younger foster carers, however, this was always a challenge, recognised nationally. While some children were well placed with older foster carers, others were better placed with younger, more active carers and so the service was working on targeting younger people, including single people and same sex couples to try to better balance the demographic make up of Medway's foster carers.
 - Recruitment campaigns – officers confirmed that it was too early to tell how well recruitment campaigns were working but confirmed one area the service was focusing more on was working harder to nurture initial enquirers and to follow those up when they don't initially materialise, as well as considering utilising those contacts in other ways, such as mentors for young people. It was also confirmed by officers that radio advertising was considered value for money.
 - ICT support – in response to a question about foster carers being supported with digital skills to enable them to best support children and young people, particularly with online learning as an example, officers

confirmed that where there was a need, carers were supported in this way, along with the children. It was added that a lot of support groups had been better attended when held virtually because it was easier for carers to attend and so a blended approach to this would be undertaken going forward.

- 4.4. The Committee noted the report and requested their comments be included in the report when presented to the Cabinet.

5. 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

6. Consultation

- 6.1. Foster carers are regularly asked for feedback on various aspects of the service and have been fully consulted on the proposed changes to the payment scheme for carers.

7. Financial implications

- 7.1. 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.
- 7.2. Failure to develop the service will result in more foster carers resigning and further loss of in-house placements.

7.3. The report describes the progress of the fostering transformation programme. Financial support has been reviewed as part of the 2021-22 budget setting process and will be kept under further review.

8. Legal implications

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

9. Recommendations

9.1. The Cabinet is asked to note the comments of the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as set out at section 4 of the report.

9.2. The Cabinet is asked to note the Fostering Service Annual Report 2020-21.

10. Suggested reason for decision

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

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Fostering Service Structure Chart

Background papers

None