

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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ANNUAL FOSTERING REPORT 2021-22

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Summary

The Annual Report for the Fostering Service sets out how the in-house fostering services met the needs of Medway's children in care in the year from April 2021 to end of March 2022 and establishes the work which should be undertaken in the coming year.

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 2021 and March 2022. 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 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 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.
- 3.2. Medway Council Fostering Service provides safe, regulated foster care placements for our children in care 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 in the care of Medway Council, 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 2021 <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sotn21>) provides further evidence of the recruitment and retention crisis in foster care and highlights their view that the need to place greater value on the foster carer role nationally is at the heart of the crisis. The pressures in the system and the lack of available families, results in poorer outcomes for children, especially those with more complex trauma because of their early experiences. The Fostering Network report in 2019 said that over 7,000 more foster carers were required to meet the needs of children coming into care. This report also highlighted 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 because 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 Fostering Service review which focussed initially on the financial and support package to carers. The review restructured the service to provide a Recruitment Team, under an experienced 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 Sections 3.11 – 3.13.
- 3.6. In September 2021 we implemented a new reward scheme for foster carers, and we lifted up the financial support we offered. While this has been positively received, we remain unable to compete financially with the national private fostering agencies.
- 3.7. 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. Many carers, especially older carers or those with health needs have resigned in the last year as a result of the impact of the pandemic and their concerns about their own health. A "Thank You" event was held in October 2021 for 12 carers who between them had more than 200 years of fostering experience and who had resigned during the pandemic. Their collective experience, knowledge, and commitment to fostering is difficult to replace.
- 3.8. 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 were adopted to ensure children were seen and safeguarded and carers were supported.
- 3.9. Although the service is largely operating as normal again, the long-term impact on carers and children is still being felt, particularly through the impact

on mental health and wellbeing. Some changes necessitated by the pandemic, such as virtual meetings and groups, have been evaluated and since these were positively received, they are now being used as part of practice going forward.

3.10. Fostering Service Structure Chart

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

3.11. The Fostering Service

- 3.11.1. The structure of the fostering service has remained the same since the last annual report which reported on the changes made as a result of increased investment in the service.
- 3.11.2. The new structure created four 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.
- 3.11.3. There are now two support teams working closely together to provide support and supervision to foster carers.
- 3.11.4. The fourth team is the Connected Carers Team who complete assessments of family and friends carers and provides Special Guardianship support. The work of this team is covered in Section 11.
- 3.11.5. The Recruitment Team had been fully staffed with permanent workers but some staff are leaving (to work in other areas of Children Services or in response to changes in their personal lives) which is creating challenges with ensuring assessments of new carers are completed in a timely way.
- 3.11.6. The Support Teams have seen some changes in staffing and continued to see some volatility with staff leaving for a variety of reasons, including internal promotion. However both teams are now able to report more settled teams, staffed in the main by permanent workers.
- 3.11.7. The work of the Support Teams is supported by a Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer (FIRO) who is a member of the Independent Reviewing Officer 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.
- 3.11.8. 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.

- 3.11.9. The Connected Carers team has seen some changes in staffing in the last year for a variety of reasons and have struggled to recruit to vacancies on a permanent basis. The team are continuing to recruit to these vacancies.
- 3.11.10. 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. As part of the investment in the service, funding was agreed for a Placement Officer to cover this duty role. This post was recruited to in September 2021 and has proved a very positive addition to the team. It has freed up social workers to be able to attend to social work tasks and the appointed worker has developed the role and is working closely with colleagues in Commissioning who search for external placements. Foster carers have provided positive feedback about the difference that consistency in this role has brought to them when considering placements.
- 3.11.11. The fostering review provided funding for 3 additional posts in the service: another therapeutic support worker to join the worker already in the service and two new posts of Children's Champions. More details of the roles and the work they are doing to support our carers and their families is in Section 3.23.
- 3.11.12. 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, Leaving Care and Fostering meet weekly to promote this good communication.

3.12. Recruitment

- 3.12.1. Fostering recruitment remains the key priority across the Fostering Service for both foster carers and Supported Lodgings providers. The Recruitment and Marketing Strategy, April 2020 – March/April 2023 is a three-year high-level strategy outlining the Fostering Services' goals and projected outcomes. The annual marketing plan is drawn from this strategy with realistic marketing tactical deliverables planned for the year ahead. The marketing strategy is pending review in March 2023, submission in April 2023.
- 3.12.2. Recruitment is particularly targeted for the following groups in no particular order of priority:
- Foster carers for children over the age of 11 years;
 - Foster carers for sibling groups;
 - Foster carers for children with complex emotional and behavioural needs including children with disabilities; and
 - Foster carers for Parent and Child placements.

3.12.3. 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. The courses will return to the classroom in May 2022.

3.12.4. 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. These events will continue to be held virtually as feedback from prospective carers suggests this is preferred.

3.13. Advertising activity

3.13.1. There has been continued investment in marketing and advertising to support our recruitment of foster carers. Digital communications channels, particularly the fostering website play an increasingly important role in how we communicate and engage with our target audiences. While the website is a key source of information - a point for customer transactions and a low-cost alternative to face to face and telephone contact - the results of the recent website statistics showed that since the launch of the new website at the beginning of November 2021, there has been huge interest in visitors seeking more information about reasons to foster with Medway Council. This demonstrates that visitors are using the website for information about fostering, as well as a comparison source, with 378 unique views to the 'Fees and allowances' page. Visitors then go back to the 'Fostering' homepage. With this information, it clearly indicates the information that visitors are seeking as part of their decision-making process into Fostering.

3.13.2. In terms of website traffic and social engagement, there is a correlation being identified between the following webpages, 'Reasons to foster with us' and 'Fees and Allowances'. Awareness and interest in Medway Council's Fostering services are increasing with the two mentioned webpages of interest to visitors. Once interest is secured, visitors are then interested in the payment aspects of fostering.

3.13.3. The Team continues to review and update the webpages so that they do not remain static. It is anticipated that we will be adding further pages and sections to the fostering website including an events calendar, and an area for approved carers.

3.13.4. 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 now operating competitively in the space where we want to be to optimise our reach to potential new carers.

3.13.5. 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 including those interested in fostering adolescents, children with disabilities, sibling groups, parent and child and supported Lodgings providers.

3.12.6 Regional online advertising campaigns include:

- Commissioned monthly adverts on radio, and a Facebook post schedule in place that focuses on targeted content scheduled for each day of the week.
- Medway Council Fostering services has a growing online presence across social media. We will enhance the reach of these social media channels by undertaking some “paid for” online advertising, as negotiated in the campaign package with Kent Media. We will utilise a variety of options, advertising generally to Medway and Swale residents, but also doing some targeted online advertising to reach the local people who may have experience of working with children.

3.12.7 Although expensive, radio advertising is very effective at reaching large numbers of people across the county. The majority of independent foster agencies advertise on local radio to attract foster carers. At key campaign points throughout the year we will utilise radio to differentiate ourselves from the Independent Fostering Agencies and communicate our experience and the support we provide.

3.12.8 The evaluation of our campaign has proven that having a dedicated Media agency with local impact and an established public profile and online presence, is successful when working on high impact campaigns. This served us well when combined with the new service launch during the last year. This continues to get our message across to a huge number of potential foster carers, utilising mediums that would usually be too costly on our own.

3.14. Recruitment activity

3.14.1. Recruitment for all fostering agencies has been challenging in recent years and the pandemic has added to these challenges. However, we are beginning to see an improvement in recruitment as a result of the new service launch in September with the uplift in fees and the impact of the new website. Between February 2022 and May 2022 there have been:

- 42 enquiries received
- 6 households have attended Skills to Foster
- 2 applicants are in Stage 1 of assessment

- 4 applicants are in Stage 2 of assessment
- 2 Supported Lodgings applicants are in Stage 1
- 1 Supported Lodgings Applicant is in Stage 2

3.14.2. Between April 2021 and March 2022, a total of 164 enquiries were received. These converted to:

- 28 home visits being undertaken, and
- 16 applications being accepted.

Out of the 12 enquiries that did not progress to applications;

- 1 applied to an IFA,
- 2 were approved carers with IFAs who decided not to transfer,
- For the remaining 9 enquiries, fostering was not right for them at this time.

Of the 16 applications, all progressed to Stage 1 (3 for Supported Lodgings)

- 4 withdrew for health, financial or family circumstances.
- 1 assessment was terminated in Stage 2
- 10 new carers were approved between April 2021-March 2022, an increase from 5 during the previous year.

3.14.3. Interest in fostering for Medway has increased significantly since the launch of the new fee structure in September 2021 and we are seeing increased numbers of potential carers in assessment. The figures above show a 10% translation rate from interest in fostering to going into the assessment process which is in line with or higher than expectations and indicates that we are attracting the right group of potential carers. However, this is not yet translating into high numbers of new carers approved by Medway sufficient to make a significant impact on the need for external placements.

Fostering recruitment remains a highly competitive market. Potential carers look at the financial reward from a fostering agency but also at the other aspects of support provided. The support offer has improved alongside the improved payment structure and the recruitment strategy is highlighting this. This increased emphasis on the support offered also encourages existing carers to remain committed to Medway.

3.15. Fostering Panel

3.15.1. 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.

3.15.2. 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.

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

Number of panels held 2021/2022	21
New Panel members	2
Resignation from Panel	1
Cancelled panels due to not being quorate	0

3.15.4. Panel membership includes a Chair, Vice-Chair, Independent Members, Social Workers, Health and Education representatives, and local councillors. The current panel chair was appointed in October 2020 and 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. A second vice chair was appointed in October 2021 as additional support to the panel and as the current vice chair indicated her wish to step back from the role.

3.15.5. Following the lockdown in March 2020 as a result of Covid 19, the Panel became virtual and has continued to be virtual using Microsoft Teams since that time. Despite the challenges through the pandemic, no panels have been cancelled and the work of panel has continued. Looking ahead it is likely that panels will include a mixture of virtual and face to face meetings to allow for the benefits of each depending on the cases being heard.

3.15.6. Summary of panel business, cases heard and categories

Form F (Approval of foster carers)	9
Form C (Full approval of connected carers as foster carers for specific child)	5
Change of Approval for foster carers	6
Permanent Match of child to carers	25 cases (for 34 children)
Standards of Care (concerns regarding care given to a child)	7 (including 1 review)
Variation of Approval of foster carer	1
Annual Review (first or supplementary report)	4
Termination of Approval	35

Change to the Usual Fostering Limit	0
Extension of Temporary Approval of connected carer	7
Change of Approval following Annual Review	2
Exemption (IFA)	0
Approval Review	0

- 3.15.7. Of 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 feel settled with their new families knowing where they will live with them 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.
- 3.15.8. 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 met very recently and also recommended deregistration. Medway Agency Decision Maker upheld the recommendation and the carer was de-registered.
- 3.15.9. In the year 2021/22 we have had 35 carers leave Medway, which is an increase from 23 in the previous year.
- 3.15.10. Of these 35 carers, 7 were connected carers; 4 of these were granted Special Guardianship Orders, in one case the child reached 18 years, in one case the child moved on and in the final case the carers resigned prior to a Standards of Care taking place.
- 3.15.11. There were 5 de-registrations or resignations because of Standards of Care investigations.
- 3.15.12. Of the remaining 23 carers, 6 transferred to Independent Fostering Agencies (of which 2 because of a house move out of the area) and 1 to another Local Authority.
- 3.15.13. The remaining 16 carers resigned from fostering for personal reasons, including ill-health, retirement due to age and other personal reasons. Several of these families had nurtured young people through to adulthood and were still supporting these young people through staying put arrangements but felt that their fostering careers had reached a natural conclusion. Although they are no longer fostering, it is positive that they continue to support these young people as they explore adulthood.
- 3.15.14. 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.

- 3.15.15. We have seen an increase in carers transferring to Independent Fostering Agencies. Exit interviews are carried out with all carers expressing an interest in transferring or leaving fostering to ensure we can address any issues which might enable carers to stay with Medway. In exit interviews, some carers have expressed frustration at the promise of change to the fee structure which took a long time to materialise. One of the carers who left is now making enquiries about returning to Medway.
- 3.15.16. Training of Panel members took place in October 2021 and a further training day is planned for later this year. The agency advisor also uses panel meetings to update panel members on relevant changes to legislation and court rulings, especially in the field of connected carers.

3.16. Fostering Service Review

- 3.16.1. It had been recognised for some time that Medway's remuneration for foster carers was 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 business. These do not give carers the support they want from locally based and knowledgeable Supervising Social Workers. Our view was that if we could improve our support package to carers including basic remuneration, we would be likely to be able to attract more carers to foster for Medway.
- 3.16.2. As a result of the fostering review from our Partners in Practice, Essex County Council, there was 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.
- 3.16.3. This new payment structure went live on 1 September 2021 and has been well received by carers, especially the increased payments for carers looking after children with disabilities and also those caring for children with more complex trauma. While the new payment structure has been generally liked by carers, payments for respite care are insufficient given the significant increases in the cost of living and need addressing and are being considered in the next stage of the review.
- 3.16.4. 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 and is also part of the continuing review of the service.

3.17. Connected Carers

- 3.17.1. 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 assessments and work to support family and friends who provide placements for children and young people. 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.
- 3.17.2. There were 11 new Connected Carer assessments undertaken in the year, and 19 children left care to a Special Guardians following an assessment. This is an increase of 8 compared to the previous year's figures. A further 2 left care, through a Child Arrangement Order.
- 3.17.3. 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 further, more in-depth assessment is undertaken. This is usually a 'Special Guardianship Assessment'.
- 3.17.4. There were 56 Viability Assessments undertaken in the year, a decrease from 87 in the previous year. This is a significant decrease, and it is difficult to determine the reasons for the decrease but may reflect the economic challenges that many families are facing and their associated reluctance to commit to taking on additional responsibilities. The robustness of viability assessments continues to improve, with little over half progressing to further assessment.
- 3.17.5. 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.
- 3.17.6. 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.

- 3.17.7. 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.
- 3.17.8. Over the past year the service has continued to focus on ensuring better outcomes for children, both before, during and following care proceedings. 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.
- 3.17.9. June 2020 saw the publication of *'Recommendations to achieve best practice in the child protection and family justice systems: Special Guardianship Orders'* by the 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 a Special Guardianship Order is an option, in the hope that it will improve outcomes for children and carers.
- 3.17.10. Until November 2020, 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 transferred to the Connected Carers Team. It is recognised nationally that Special Guardians do not always receive the support provided to adopters. Since taking on the role of supporting Special Guardians, the Connected Carer Team have been aware that our Special Guardians are not always receiving high quality care and support. One of the seniors in the Team has taken on the role of reviewing the support offered. The senior and the team manager have been working with a coach provided by the South East Sector Led Improvement Programme (SESLIP) to develop the service.
- 3.17.11. All Special Guardians are currently being asked to complete a questionnaire to determine their support needs and we provide them with

information on what support services are available locally through universal services. Information on what the team can offer is also being provided. 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 Special Guardians face which will in turn improve assessment practice.

3.18. Allegations/ Quality of Care/ Complaints

Allegations and Quality of Care Concerns

- 3.18.1. All allegations and quality of care concerns are fully explored and analysed to ensure all our children are safeguarded and concerns are addressed. In total during the year, ten carers were reported to the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) for investigation. For three of these there was no further action as concerns were not substantiated. For one carer the concerns were not regarding her as a foster carer, but the concerns led to her resignation from fostering. A further two carers resigned prior to a Standards of Care investigation being completed and one was deregistered following an investigation. One carer is on an action plan with a recommendation for an action plan for another. The final case has not yet concluded.
- 3.18.2. Although the numbers of allegations are of concern, it does indicate the commitment by the service to ensuring that all allegations are acted upon and fully investigated to ensure children are kept safe in foster care.

Fostering Complaints

- 3.18.3. For the period covered by this report, there was one complaint made by a foster carer about the fostering and children in care services. There were two complaints made by Special Guardians about allowance payments and two complaints from Special Guardians about other aspects of support. All these complaints were dealt with at stage one and we were able to achieve a satisfactory outcome for the complainants.

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 2022		Connected care	In-house foster care (% of fostered)
Age	Age 0	4	12 (57%)
	Aged 1- 4	7	21 (62%)
	Aged 5- 9	4	21 (35%)
	Aged 10-15	9	68 (47%)
	Aged 16-17	4	21 (45%)
Parent & child		0	4 (100%)
Gender	Female	11	64 (48%)
	Male	17	79 (46%)
Child with a disability		3	8 (53%)
Ethnicity	White	23	158 (48%)
	Asian/Asian British	0	5 (56%)
	Black/Black British	0	10 (50%)
	Mixed	5	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 and percentages of children of different ages in care on a particular day – 31st March 2022. The percentages recorded reflect the percentage of all children in care of that age cohort who are placed in in-house placements. For example, 57% of the youngest cohort were placed with in-house carers. However this figure does not include those placed in fostering for adoption placements. 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. It is rare for a baby to be placed with external carers unless it is part of a sibling group.
- 3.18.2. Of note in the figures above is the low number of children between the ages of 5 and 9 placed in-house compared to other age groups. The figure in the previous year was 53% so this may be an anomaly but is being monitored and compared to previous figures so recruitment campaigns can be adjusted if needed to meet the needs of the children coming into care.
- 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 emotional 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 placements were accommodated with in-house carers on the date surveyed above. These are generally very expensive placements when sought externally. Medway has 12 trained Parent and Child carers, which is a reasonable number to meet need although not all are available at any time to take these placements as some will have other placements.

3.18.4. It is important to note that these figures relate to children in placement on a particular day and the picture will be different at other times in the year. The service is working on develop a dashboard for Fostering to be able to better analyse the use of placements during the year and to more responsively target recruitment to meet the need.

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. 35 children were matched with their carers 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 204 in March 2022. 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 31 Mar 2022)	0 - 3 Mths	3 - 6 mths	6 - 12 mths	1 - 2 years	2+ years	Total
Friends & relatives	11	2	2	2	11	28
Foster care	31	25	59	51	140	306
Total	42	27	61	53	151	334

3.20.5. The Fostering Service aims to identify any instability in placement at the earliest opportunity. 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 for all the children 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 Independent Reviewing Officer 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 approximately six fostering families, depending on need, offering sleep overs once a month for two nights for each child, emergency support at times of crisis, play dates and intensive therapeutic support. We organise a coffee morning once a month for the 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 relationships and the fostering community. 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 of children up to the age of 11 years. The primary hub carers slotted into a grandparent role with the younger children, taking them swimming, on bike rides or picnics in the park. 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.
- 3.21.5. The Adolescent hub was delayed by Covid but opened in June 2021, and the hub carers are supporting six fostering families and six young people. Their garden provides sensory experiences including a sensory shed with lights, sounds and water features, they own the woods at the back of their garden where our 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 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. 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.

3.21.7. 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. Training and support to carers is key in developing a good fostering service where carers understand the task expected of them and are well supported and trained to enable them to put themselves into the mind of a child and understand what a child's behaviour is telling them. Following a review of training and expectations for carers, mandatory training was revised. Foster carers are 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 of 3 days of further training following approval. All

existing foster carers have also been booked on the training to ensure that the whole cohort of Medway foster carers receive the same information and adhere to the expectations of Medway Fostering Service.

- 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 areas, such as adolescents, babies, parent and child and attendance at these groups is monitored.
- 3.22.5. Although much of the training is online, some is now being provided face to face in the classroom and this has included some bespoke training for carers of children with complex needs because of disability. This has been positively received by the carers.

Personal Development Plans

- 3.22.6. Personal Development Plans (PDP) are used across the service. These allow foster carers to identify what their training goals are for the course of the year, as well as any additional support they will require to achieve this.
- 3.22.7. Personal Development Plans are considered at foster carers annual review meetings, and progress is considered and recognised in this forum.

Training

- 3.22.8. All approved foster carers must complete a Training Support and Development Standards (TSDS) portfolio in their first year of fostering and all connected carers within 18 months.
- 3.22.9. The Fostering Service offers workshops to support carers in completing this portfolio, delivered by staff from within Fostering.
- 3.22.10. As part of the fostering review, the current scheme for payments linked to training has been reviewed and this is now linked to skills demonstrated by carers through their annual reviews and training completed.

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. During the last year, the service has recruited to a new Therapeutic Support post and two Children's Champions roles. These established and new roles have added to the support we can offer fostering families with the role of the Support Workers to work with and support the carers and the Children's Champions to support children in care and the birth children of carers. The Support Workers are involved in supporting the hubs and will also work with individual carers for a series of sessions where placements are in difficulty or there is a risk of breakdown. The Children's Champions are supporting the children in our families and are setting up events and activities to ensure that the children in fostering families have an opportunity to share their views and worries.
- 3.23.6. 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.
- 3.23.7. 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 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.
- 3.23.8. This last year has seen a greater recognition of the work done by some carers in parenting children with complex disabilities. This is now recognised within the new payment structure and some bespoke training and support packages have been developed to support carers to keep children in placement who might otherwise need residential care. This group also have their own support group and the service is planning a disability hub along the same lines as the primary and adolescent hub to further support these valued carers.

Support for children

- 3.23.9. 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. These face-to-face activities were stopped as a result of Covid but competitions and activities have been run online to engage with children in care and also birth children of carers. The Team ran a series of successful activities for Sons and Daughters month, which is held every year in October. Increasingly face to face activities are being planned by the Children's Champions.
- 3.23.10. 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.
- 3.23.11. 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 has been developing areas of involvement and participation for children and young people in addition to those mentioned above. We have a care experienced young person attending our Skills to Foster course and a care experienced person sits on our fostering panel.
- 3.24.2. Links have been made with the Medway Children and Young People Council (MCYPC) and foster carers have attended the MCYPC meeting to answer questions from young people around fostering. A foster carer also sits on the Corporate Parenting Board.
- 3.25. Service Developments 2022/23
- 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 to increase the fees paid to our foster carers. Much of

the work of the service in the next year will be to build on the progress already made and to continue the reform of the service including by reviewing and realigning the fees paid to respite carers, strengthening the online presence by creating a dedicated website for foster carers and developing a performance dashboard for the service to better understand the throughput of work and what the areas of improvement for the service are.

- 3.25.3. We are continuing to enhance our offer to foster carers by seeking to commission support to carers from the National Association of Therapeutic Parenting. The National Association of Therapeutic Parenting provides, useful resources, empathic listening, listening circles, a helpline and peer support to its members.
- 3.25.4. 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.
- 3.25.5. In the following year we will consider how to benefit from the goodwill and interest generated by the campaign to offer homes to parents and children fleeing the war in Ukraine and see whether we can support some of these families to consider fostering for Medway. We will also seek to reach out to the LGBTQI+ community to understand why they are not as active in the fostering field as they are in adoption, and we will generate recruitment campaigns specifically aimed at the LGBTQI+ community.
- 3.25.6. To further support our drive to ensure that all carers are parenting therapeutically and to support placement stability, the service will be continuing to embed the new support roles into the work of the service. The training programme will be further enhanced.
- 3.25.7. 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.
- 3.25.8. 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, including the proposed development of the disability hub. 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.
- 3.25.9. 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.
- 3.25.10. Support to care leavers through expansion of Supported Lodgings providers and through the updated Staying Put policy will be further developed.

4. 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
Training and support to carers does not equip them sufficiently to parent children who have suffered significant trauma	Carers need good quality support and challenge from supervising social workers who are well trained and have caseloads at levels that allow for regular high quality support visits. Without this support, placement breakdowns are more likely which is damaging to children in care	Staffing in the service has been increased and additional support staff give extra support to placements. Placement stability meetings are called as soon as any issues arise, and this area will be further strengthened.	C2

5. Consultation

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

6. Financial implications

- 6.1 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.
- 6.2 Failure to develop the service will result in more foster carers resigning and further loss of in-house placements.

7. Legal implications

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

8. Recommendations

- 8.1 The Committee is asked to note the Fostering Service Annual Report 2021-22.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Fostering Service Structure Chart

Background papers

None