

Cabinet

27 August 2024

Annual Fostering Report 2023-2024

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Adam Price, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services (including statutory responsibilities)

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

Author: Andrada Pepenel, Head of Service – Provider Services

Summary

The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of the business and operations of Medway Fostering Service during the 2023-2024 period. The report also sets out our aims and objectives for the next financial year.

The report was previously by the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 1 August 2024, the minutes of which are set out at section 8 of the report.

1. Recommendation

1.1. The Cabinet is asked to note the comments made by the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as set out in section 8 of the report.

1.2. The Cabinet is asked to note the Fostering Service Annual Report 2023-2024.

2. Suggested reasons for decision

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

3. Budget and policy framework

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

- 3.2. Medway Council Fostering Service provides safe, regulated foster care placements for children in care and contributes to improving outcomes for the most vulnerable children. The key priority for the service is to ensure that all children who are in the care of Medway Council, whether the arrangement is short or long term are cared for in loving, secure and stable families.
- 3.3. The Fostering Regulations 25.7 requires the senior managers of the Local Authority to receive written reports on the management, outcomes, and financial position of the fostering service.
- 3.4. This report is consistent with national policy, legislation, and guidance. It is linked to key local planning documents, in particular the Medway Council Sufficiency Strategy and the Council Plan priority that Children and Young People have the best start in life in Medway.

4. Background

- 4.1. The Annual Report is for a wide audience of stakeholders including Elected Members, service users, staff, and partner agencies. For reports to formal Member meetings, it may be necessary to set out information, which will be published in a confidential appendix. Only information fully within categories defined in legislation as “exempt” can be contained in a confidential appendix.
- 4.2. The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of the business and operations of Medway Fostering Service during the financial year 2023-2024. It includes relevant data on the service's performance and activities, as well as updates on the functioning and progress of the Fostering Panel. Additionally, the report outlines the developments that have taken place in the Service throughout the year, as well as any planned initiatives for the upcoming 2024-2025 period.

5. Advice and analysis

- 5.1. Medway Fostering Services objectives are:
 - diversity: Equality of opportunity by having a positive regard for the child's racial, religious, linguistic, cultural and gender identity needs.
 - have a vast choice of high-quality foster homes available to meet the complex and diverse needs of children.
 - foster homes support the child's permanency plan and promote the child's physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development by providing each child with the opportunity of developing their full potential, through health care, education and leisure activities that will enhance their life chance.
 - best practice that is compliant with Fostering Services Regulations 2011, as amended by The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review and Fostering Services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013,

National Minimum Standards and the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010.

- delivery of regular supervision to each foster carer from a supervising social worker who will assist in identifying the individual training and development needs of foster carers, so that the service continually develops the fostering workforce.
- that foster carers feel valued by providing regular updates on the service; building the Medway foster carer community, consulting regularly and learning from those who are in receipt of services.
- service performance is monitored, assessed with outcomes measured via a quality assurance framework.
- it continues to innovate and develop the service in consultation with children in care and foster carers through groups, workstreams and carer to-carer training.

5.2. The Fostering Service

5.2.1. The fostering service structure has not changed since the last annual report, it consists of four teams: The Fostering Recruitment and Assessment Team, Two Generic (Support and Development) Fostering Teams, The Connected Carers and Post Special Guardianship Order Team. Additionally, the service provides oversight for the Family Time Service, which is commissioned to Family Action. The overall management of the service falls under the responsibility of the Fostering Service Manager, who also acts as the Registered Manager.

5.2.2. The Generic Fostering teams are led by 2 permanent Team Managers, who manage a total of 15 staff, of which 12 are qualified Social Workers. In the past year, we have experienced changes within the service as three Supervising Social Workers left. However, we successfully addressed this by recruiting permanent staff to fill all the vacant positions.

5.2.3. The Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) is a crucial figure in the fostering service. They oversee and safeguard the well-being of children and young people by assessing whether foster carers and their households remain suitable for care. The Fostering IRO evaluates terms of approval for each home, attends panels and oversee reports, and actively contributes to allegation or standard of care investigations. Their independent perspective ensures the child's best interests are advocated for.

5.2.4. The Agency Decision Maker (ADM) is now delegated to two independent ADMs working on a rota basis, reviews recommendations from the Fostering Panel and decides whether applicants should be approved as foster carers. Additionally, the ADMs assess the continued suitability of foster carers based on annual reviews and recommendations from the Fostering Panel.

5.3. Recruitment and Assessment Team

5.3.1. The Recruitment and Assessment team is led by a Team Manager and includes one Senior Practitioner and four Social Workers. All staff members in the team hold permanent positions. Currently, the team is in the process of recruiting a Marketing Officer. This post will strengthen Medway's ability to deliver a strong marketing recruitment and retention strategy of new foster carers.

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

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

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

5.4. Advertising activity:

5.4.1. The demand for foster carers across the nation is exceptionally high. Foster carer recruitment is extremely competitive throughout the country, and our Council is no different. The fostering market is intense, with numerous Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) actively advertising for foster carers locally. Additionally, several Local Authorities in the nearby vicinity also engage in recruitment efforts, which means this reduces the pool for prospective carers constantly.

5.4.2. During the period from April 2023 to May 2024, we ran three major campaigns that received promotion through a blend of PR, social media, and digital advertising.

5.4.3. We actively engage with the community by participating in events at shopping centres, parks, and festivals. Our primary goal was to raise awareness about the critical need for more foster carers. Additionally, our consistent efforts in maintaining a strong digital presence ensured that we continuously reinforced the campaign messages throughout the year. Medway Fostering used pay per click advertising (PPC) to capture more of those who are actively searching to become a foster carer in the area. Performing a Google search is a common way for prospective carers to obtain information and it is estimated that 40% of people will click on one of the top three paid for ads.

- 5.4.4. Medway Fostering's Facebook page has almost 1700 followers and on average we have 2 posts a week. Instagram has 71 followers and posted 180 posts in the last year. By increasing a larger audience, the service will have more people who will see the posts and more likely to click on the website for more information and request a home visit (e.g. 100 followers/5 people see the posts; 1,000 followers/50 people see the posts.) This year-long campaigns specifically targets Facebook users in the Medway area and beyond who are likely to have an interest in Medway Fostering's services. The primary goal is to encourage them to like, follow and share the page.
- 5.4.5. The fostering website remains the main source of enquiries, and in February 2024 the enquiry form was transferred on a portal, which means a reduction of processing time.
- 5.4.6. In 2023-2024, Medway had two main events for celebrating foster carers. We joined Fostering Network during Foster Care Fortnight in May 2023 by hosting an event for our foster carers. During this time, we launched "Make a Difference in a Child's Life Today" campaign. Some of the materials gathered during the Foster Care Fortnight event was then used throughout the recruitment campaigns.
- 5.4.7. During October 2023, we had a significant raised presence on social media, and we launched "Join Our Foster Care Family" campaign, which coincided with Sons and Daughters month. The campaign highlighted the friendships and relationships that can develop between children in care and foster carers' families.
- 5.4.8. The second event was hosted during the Christmas period, where we launched "Foster Care: A Rewarding Experience" campaign. The campaign featured stories from foster carers who have found the experience to be one of the most rewarding things they have ever done.

5.5. Recruitment activity

- 5.5.1. The recruitment of foster carers continues to be both a local and national challenge. The Fostering in England 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023¹ report published by Ofsted in November 2023 highlights that since 2019, the number of mainstream Local Authority (LA) households has fallen by 11%, and the number of family and friends' households has increased by 21%.
- 5.5.2. Since 2021, there have been year-on-year net decreases in the number of mainstream fostering households in both the IFA and LA sectors. The number of approved mainstream households during 2022- 2023 shows a 5% decrease and the number of applications received is 18% lower than 2018-2019. At the end of March 2023, there were around 3,800 newly approved mainstream households. This represented a 26% decrease compared with 2019. Since 2019, the number of vacant mainstream places has decreased by

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/fostering-in-england-1-april-2022-to-31-march-2023/fostering-in-england-1-april-2022-to-31-march-2023>

25%. The most substantial decrease in vacant fostering places over this period has been in the LA sector, where the number has fallen by 29%.

- 5.5.3. The Fostering Service continue to be a much-needed service provision in relation to children and young people who need to be cared for by Medway Children Service. The service requires a diverse range of foster carers who are skilled and resourceful to provide stability, security, and a positive experience of family life. The overview during the last year reflects the larger scale challenges with the gap expanding between the children in care number growth and the number of foster carer approvals. The Medway fostering community have stepped forward at times of great difficulty to support the service's recruitment drive. This reflects a positive and continued effort to recruit more fostering households, it also demonstrates and reinforces the meaning and value of fostering.
- 5.5.4. The recruitment and retention of foster carers have remained firmly on Medway's agenda. The challenge has been to grow and retain the fostering population and to recruit those who are willing and able to support children and young people with high level of need, larger sibling groups and teenagers. During April 2023 to March 2024, Medway's Fostering Service received 366 initial enquiries and following preliminary discussion with the prospective applicants there were 59 registrations of interest. The enquiries figure reflects a continued commitment and drive to ensure that Medway's fostering information reached a large audience. Given the online and in-person awareness events of the last year this continues to be a huge testimony to the Local Authority's aim to recruit more carers. A high number of enquiries did not progress to initial home visits, this is attributable to new enquirers not meeting the initial criteria, i.e. no spare bedroom or have a birth child under the age of 1. We remain optimistic that applicants with whom we have established a good relationship will come back to us when the time is right.
- 5.5.5. The team booked 50 home initial home visits and invited 36 applicants to the skills to foster training. The team completed 34 initial home visits between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024. Some enquirers decided not to proceed with the booked home visits. Skills to foster invites were sent to 36 prospective applicants, and a total of 16 households attended the training. Following the initial home visits there were 26 application packs sent to prospective applicants inviting them to formally apply to become foster carers with Medway. Following this we had received a total of 12 applications from prospective foster carers and 2 applicants decided not to proceed following skills to foster. Medway approved a total of 7 fostering mainstream households between April 2023- March 2024 and we currently have a total of 8 prospective mainstream fostering households in stage 2 assessment as of March 2024.
- 5.5.6. The continued development of our online presence has grown from strength to strength with continued high levels of engagement and positive interaction. Despite Medway experiencing a growth in interests and enquiries, the approval figures and conversation rate is lower. The sharp rise in enquiries

seen during 2023 have now settled. A great amount of effort and resources have been invested by the dedicated Recruitment and Assessment team with ongoing support and commitment from the Generic Fostering teams and the Connected Carers team, which it has felt has contributed to the ongoing assessments.

- 5.5.7. The Recruitment and Assessment team oversees the recruitment and assessment of prospective Supported Lodgings Providers. Supported Lodgings Providers offer young people aged 16 to 25 a safe family environment to call home whilst developing their independent living skills. Supported Lodgings Providers offer significant practical and emotional support to the young people when required and to young people towards independence by assisting with budgeting, cooking, etc.
- 5.5.8. Between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024 there were a total of 10 Supported Lodgings enquiries, which resulted in one approval. Two applicants withdrew during the application and training stage as they decided to foster with an independent fostering agency and 2 applicants transferred to in house fostering. As of March 2024, there are 4 Supported Lodgings Providers in assessment, which is envisaged to be approved by July 2024.
- 5.5.9. Medway Fostering Service competes with several other Local Authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies, and the unique selling point remains word of mouth and connections to local people. Schools are a main part of the community and Medway fostering has continued to build strong relationships with education settings. The service has worked with some local schools to help share messages about fostering, Private Fostering and Supported Lodgings with their staff and parents. The fostering website has been updated regularly, to ensure the information is up to date and the service continues to use foster carer videos that will connect with new enquirers.
- 5.5.10. The Recruitment service has committed to attend local events, staff took part in the Medway Interfaith Association Forums, Chatham carnival, Medway Pride, and the Walk for Peace - Uniting Medway's Communities event.

5.6. Fostering Panel

- 5.6.1. In line with regulations, the service operates a Fostering Panel chaired by a skilled, independent, and experienced chair. The work of the Fostering Panel is supported by the Panel Adviser.
- 5.6.2. The functions of the Fostering Panel are set out in the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the Children Act Guidance Volume 4 Fostering Services 2011. The Fostering Panel has responsibility for making recommendations to the ADM regarding the approval of foster carers and the numbers and ages of children for whom they should be approved, approval of connected carers, changes of approval, consideration of standards of care concerns and oversight of the foster carers' first reviews and any subsequent reviews that may need Panel's consideration. The Panel also has a role in

permanence planning where long-term fostering is considered the best option, and the child is matched with their permanent foster carers.

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

5.6.4. During April 2023 and March 2024, Fostering Panel has sat on 29 occasions with one panel cancelled due to not being quorate. Between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024, Medway Fostering Panel has recruited 7 new members to the Central List, we have also had 2 panel members resign, taking the total number of Central List Members to 21. There are 3 Elected Members currently going through compliance. Moving forward the central list we shall have 4 elected members sitting on a rotational basis. Panel member appraisals are currently underway. All Panel members will have an appraisal annually.

5.6.5. Over the 29 panels, 134 cases have been heard:

Items at Panel	Number
Permanent Matches	15
Form C	10
Form F	7
Form F Update	1
First annual reviews	11
Annual Reviews	30
Change of approval	12
Reg 24 extension	16
Allegations and Standards of Care	8
Resignation- Generic Foster Carer	17
Resignation- Connected Carer	7

Table 1 - Summary of Panel business, between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024

5.6.6. During 1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024 there was a total of 25 fostering household deregistration. This is the smallest number in the last 7 years as it can be seen below.

<u>Deregistration</u>	
Collection year	Deregistration
2017	40
2018	34
2019	40
2021	42
2022	53
2023	39
2024	25

Table 3 – De-registration of carers between 2017 – 2024

Table 4 – De-registration of carers between 2021 – 2024

<u>Deregistration by Reason</u>	DER5	DER3	DER2	DER1	DER4	DER6
<u>Collection year</u>	Ceased Fostering - Adoption	Initiated by foster carer	Initiated by fostering service	Transferred to IFA	Transferred to LA	Special Guardianship
2021	1	16	25			0
2022		22	28	3	0	0
2023		12	25	1	1	0
2024	0	17	0	5	0	3

5.7. The Connected Carers Team

- 5.7.1. The Connected Carers Team consist of one team manager, two senior practitioners, one experienced social worker, a newly qualified social worker, and a part time experienced social worker.
- 5.7.2. The Connected Carers team is responsible for assessing potential relatives and friends who step in as alternative caregivers when a child cannot stay with their biological parents. This team carries out both scheduled and urgent assessments. The team organises events for the special guardians and their families and monthly support groups and coffee mornings for carers. For those carers who are employed or live outside the local area, the team offers evening online training sessions.
- 5.7.3. The Connected Carers team arranges specific training sessions that focus on understanding the assessment process and the Special Guardianship Orders. These sessions explore the various types of legal orders, their implications, and guide participants on how to ask pertinent questions to fully comprehend each order's impact and responsibilities.

5.7.4. Following the granting of special guardianship orders, the team has been actively providing support to special guardians requesting support. In 2023-2024 we had a total of 184 special guardian families looking after 254 children and young people.

5.7.5. Over the past year, they have successfully submitted 19 applications to the Adoption Support Fund, securing a total of £41,695 in therapeutic funding. The Adoption Support Fund² is a UK government initiative designed to finance essential therapeutic services for families with adopted children, special guardianship orders, or child arrangement orders. It aims to help these families access the support they need more easily, ensuring that children and young people up to the age of 21 (or 25 with an Education, Health, and Care Plan) can receive the necessary interventions to promote positive outcomes.

5.7.6. During past year there were 2 Special Guardianship breakdowns where the children have come back into care, in one case the child remained looked after by another relative and one child has moved into foster placement.

5.7.7. During April 2023 to March 2024, there was a total number of 187 viability assessments request, which is an increase from the year before with a total of 152 viability assessments requests. Also, it is important to note the trends of requests in the past years, with 56 Viability Assessments undertaken in the year 2021-2022, and 87 completed in the year 2020-2021.

5.8. Allegations/ Quality of Care/ Complaints:

5.8.1. All allegations and quality of care concerns are fully explored and analysed to ensure all children are safeguarded and concerns are addressed. In total during the year, 14 carers were reported to the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) for consultation compared to 18 the previous financial year. When required the Fostering Service works in partnership with the operational social work teams and the Police to investigate concerns and take action to safeguard the welfare of children.

5.9. Foster carer learning and development

5.9.1. 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. Foster carers are expected to complete:

- Paediatric First Aid (to be completed by both carers) updated every 3 years;
- Understanding child development (to be completed by both carers) updated every 3 years;
- Understand behaviour of children and young people (to be completed by both carers) updated every 3 years;

² <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/adoption-support-fund-asf>

- Equality and Diversity (to be completed by both carers) updated every 3 years; Safeguarding children level 1 (to be completed by both carers) updated every 3 years;
- Online safety – risks to children (main carer and desirable for secondary carer) updated every 3 years;
- Medication awareness and safe handling of medicines (to be completed by main carer and desirable for secondary carer) updated every 3 years;
- Keeping good records (main carer and desirable for secondary carer) updated every 3 years;
- GDPR foundation level (to be completed by both carers) updated every 3 years.

5.9.2. We continue to have a focus on therapeutic parenting and all carers have been provided with access to the National Association of Therapeutic Parenting and Foster Talk. These providers offer access to support group, listening circles, mentor, and other online resources.

5.9.3. Induction Training is offered to all new carers which comprises of 3 days of further training following approval. All existing foster carers have been booked on the training to ensure that the whole cohort of Medway foster carers receive the same information and adhere to the expectations of Medway Fostering Service.

5.9.4. All approved foster carers must complete a Training Support and Development Standards (TSDS) portfolio in their first year of fostering and all connected carers within 18 months. The Fostering Service offers workshops to support carers in completing this portfolio, delivered by staff from within Fostering.

5.10. Support for carers, children and placements

- 5.10.1. Support groups are offered monthly to foster carers and there is an expectation that all carers attend support groups to meet their registration requirements.
- 5.10.2. There are formal support groups hosted across Medway and facilitated by supervising social workers and support workers face to face monthly.
- 5.10.3. Medway Fostering Service continues to offer mentoring and support to new carers throughout their first year. Carers are matched with an experienced foster carer who offers formal and informal support in understanding the fostering role. This service has also been offered when carers outside their first-year need support in managing a new task, such as moving children on to adoption.
- 5.10.4. Medway Council continues to pay for all foster carers to be members of Foster Talk. Carers receive 24-hour support, as well as advice, guidance, and resources on a range of issues.

5.10.5. A monthly newsletter is produced for carers, which contains all information relevant to the Service, ideas and suggestions, relevant research and legislation and upcoming training and opportunities.

5.10.6. The Fostering Service hosted two events for the fostering families and the children in their care. Last year the celebrations events were: Fostering Fortnight celebration, and Christmas celebrations. These events offer an opportunity for foster carers to network, enabling children to spend time with other children in care, provide informal support to foster carers and their families and for the foster carers to feel valued by the Council.

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

5.11.1. The Fostering Service benefits from the support of a care experienced young person attending the Skills to Foster course and a care experienced person sits on the Fostering Panel.

5.11.2. The Fostering Service has a Mind of My Own champion, and all carers are supported in utilising this to help children and young people give feedback and communicate. Supervising social workers also use this when working with children and young people.

5.12. Service development 2023-2024

5.12.1. We strongly believe that all children and young people should be cared for by foster carers or Supported Lodgings Providers who are trauma informed and therapeutically minded. Our vision is to have a 'whole service culture' of therapeutic and trauma informed parenting. We plan to achieve this through commissioning psychologists in the fostering team and ensuring that all training, supervision, support and processes for foster carers and social care staff support this culture.

5.12.2. Across the UK over the next two years the Department for Education will invest over £27 million via the Fostering Recruitment and Retention Programme. The programme aims to deliver end-to-end improvements across foster care, by attracting new leads, boosting approvals of foster carers in areas of specific shortage, as well as addressing retention through better support to existing foster carers. Nine self-selected "clusters" of Local Authorities successfully bid to deliver the programme over the next two years.

5.12.3. The Fostering Recruitment and Retention Programme contains three strands of work: a regional fostering recruitment hub, a regional foster care recruitment communications campaign, and the roll out of the evidence based 'Mockingbird' model to improve foster care retention.

5.12.4. Bracknell Forest Council have been selected by the DfE to lead the South-East Fostering Recruitment Hub and they will work in co-production and collaboration with the 19 Local Authority cluster members to realise the vision for the programme to increase sufficiency in the SE.

- 5.12.5. Local Authority cluster members include Bracknell Forest, Brighton and Hove, Kent, Medway, Achieving for Children (Richmond, Kingston and Windsor and Maidenhead), Brighter Futures for Children (Reading), West Berkshire, Oxfordshire, Hampshire, Isle of Wight, East Sussex, West Sussex, Wokingham, Slough, Southampton, Milton Keynes, Surrey, and Portsmouth.
- 5.12.6. Regional vision: Ensure we can support more South East children to be fostered in the South East reducing reliance on IFAs. 19 Local Authority organisations participating in 'Local Authority Fostering South East' (the regional fostering recruitment hub or hub). Specifically, the purpose of this fostering marketing recruitment strategy is to identify ways, throughout the pilot, that the region will recruit foster carers. It does set out how regional marketing is intended to compliment and support localised approaches driven by our participating Local Authorities. The strategy sets out that the regional hub is intended to focus on the overall values of foster carers embedding a relational approach in all marketing. It will be supported by materials that cover why people might want to foster, the values and impact of the work, the different types of fostering and why you should foster for a Local Authority.
- 5.12.7. Local Authorities will be able to focus on their specific Local Authority offer (including pay, support, perks, training etc), and further build on a relational, human, and personal approach which we know is key to converting potentially interested people into approved foster carers. The focus of campaigns will be three bursts of campaign activity over the first year of the pilot with an initial focus on awareness raising, followed by an overlapping call to action campaign and then targeted themed seasonal campaigns focused on the residents likely to share the values that will make them good foster carers.
- 5.12.8. We are pursuing a mix of media channels including TV, social media as well as more targeted events and publications for specific communities. We will not be focusing on broad brush marketing (i.e. buses and roundabouts) and where we use mass media it will be highly targeted (e.g. SkyAdSmart) to the customer segments we have identified are likely to share 'pioneer' values. Through targeted marketing campaigns and engaging messaging, we aim to attract more enquiries and increase our reach to potential foster carers. Our goal is to provide loving homes for children in care and to ensure that we have a sustainable pool of foster carers who can meet the diverse needs of the children we support.

6. Risk management

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Insufficient in-house fostering placements available	There is a risk that there is insufficient accommodation to ensure that	There is a recruitment strategy in place to recruit more	BII

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
	<p>placements are right for the child and that this could lead to utilising more expensive external foster placements.</p>	<p>Medway foster carers.</p> <p>The offer to foster carers have been reviewed to attract more carers to Medway.</p> <p>Development of a recruitment service to ensure assessments are timely and applicants are well supported.</p> <p>Medway is part of the South East Regional Recruitment Hub which launched on 8 July 2024.</p> <p>Medway will be embedding the Mockingbird model which will create more resilience for the service.</p>	
<p>Training and support to carers does not equip them sufficiently to parent children who have suffered significant trauma.</p>	<p>Carers need good quality support and challenge from supervising social workers who are well trained and have caseloads at levels that allow for regular high quality support visits.</p> <p>Without this support, placement breakdowns are more likely which is damaging to children in care</p>	<p>Staffing in the service has been increased and additional support staff give extra support to placements.</p> <p>Placement stability meetings are called as soon as any issues arise, and this area will be further strengthened.</p>	<p>BII</p>

For risk rating, please refer to the following table:

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

7. Consultation

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

8. Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

- 8.1. The report was considered by the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 1 August 2024 and its comments are set out below:
- 8.2. The Head of Provider Services, Children and Adults, presented the report which detailed a summary of business and operations of the service for 2023-2024 and set out the aims and objectives for the next financial year.
- 8.3. Members raised several comments and questions which included:
- 8.4. **Recruitment** – in response to a comment that there had been a year on year decline in foster carers, the officer acknowledged that recruitment and retention remained a challenge, not just locally but this was experienced nationally. There were ongoing campaigns, including being part of the south east recruitment hub and ongoing media recruitment to address workforce issues.
- 8.5. It was further asked what was behind some of the loss of foster carers and the officer said there were various reasons, including retirement, transfer to other local authorities and personal reasons.
- 8.6. **Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA)** - it was asked what was behind some foster carers leaving to join IFA's. The officer said this was a personal decision, which could be driven by various factors such as the packages offered or being able to specialise in specific areas. The team responded to

this by offering other various means of support and specialised training where appropriate.

8.7. **Spare Bedroom** - it was commented that one of the difficulties for prospective carers was not having a spare bedroom. The officer acknowledged the issues faced with spare bedrooms and would continue to work with other colleagues, in particular the Planning department, to ensure that Medway's plans for properties were mindful of fostering regulations.

8.8. **Decision:**

The Committee noted the Fostering Service Annual Report 2023-2024.

9. Climate change implications

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

10. Financial implications

10.1. The failure to secure enough in-house placements will continue to result in more young people being placed in more expensive external placements creating further budget pressures on an already overspent placement budget.

10.2. Failure to continue to develop the service or keep our allowances in line with other Local Authorities and agencies will result in more foster carers resigning and further loss of in-house placements. This in turn forces us to use more external placements.

11. Legal implications

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

Lead officer contact

Andrada Pepenel, Head of Service – Provider Services, Children's Social Care

Email: andrada.pepenel@medway.gov.uk

Appendices

None

Background papers

None