



Short Breaks Sufficiency Strategy 2024-2027

Executive summary

The vision of this strategy is to ensure that in Medway Short Breaks are available for disabled children and their families when they need them – providing breaks and support early, preventing and managing crises to help keep families together. The purpose of this strategy is not to make savings. Instead, we aim to make changes so that targeted short breaks are available to those who need them most, and that children, young people and their families have a clear choice of flexible and cost-effective services to meet their needs.

Seven recommendations have been identified to fulfil the vision:

1. Co-produce a short break statement
2. Revamp and update the Local Offer Website and signposting
3. Invest in training and improved communication to parents and carers
4. Review short breaks eligibility and inclusion criteria
5. Invest in data intelligence
6. Develop more commissioned services
7. Address recruitment and retention challenges

1. What is a Short Break?

Under schedule 2 of the Children Act 1989 (Legislation.gov.uk, 2012a) and the Breaks for Carers of Disabled Children Regulations 2011 (Legislation.gov.uk, 2012b), a short break is when children and young people (CYP) with disabilities participate in enjoyable activities during their leisure time (outside of school hours), for example, playing sport, attending after school clubs, or spending a few days away from home. They usually take place outside of the home, but they could also be carried out in the home of an approved carer. Short breaks enable CYP to develop new relationships, skills, and confidence.

In addition, they are a preventative measure that support the adults who are responsible for caring for these CYP to continue to do so, and do so more effectively, because breaks from caring responsibilities provide parents/carers with the time necessary to –

- rest and recuperate,
- undertake education, training, or regular leisure activities,
- effectively meet the needs of and spend quality time with other children in the family,
- complete essential household tasks.

Short breaks for Carers of Disabled Children Departmental Advice for Local Authorities (2011) states that access to a wide range of short breaks services is linked to a reduction in the number of disabled children and young people becoming a child in care.

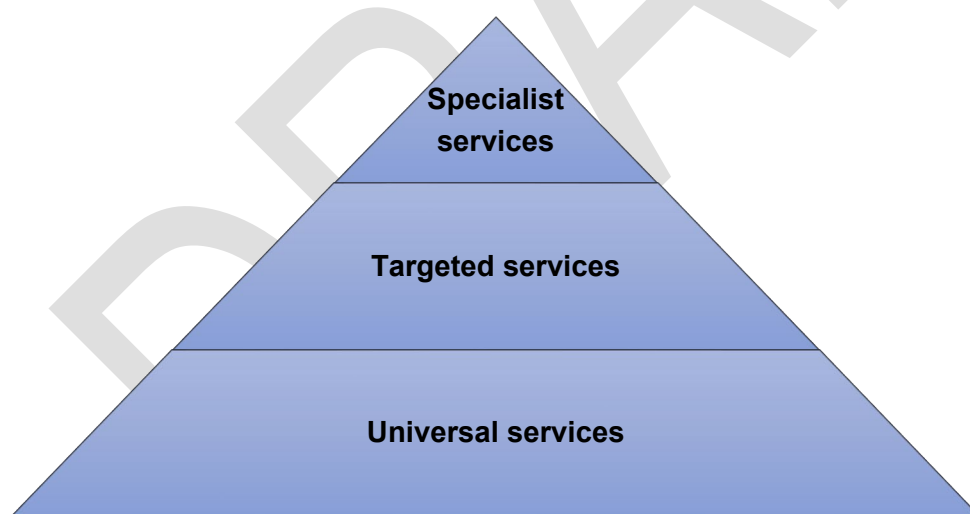
Short breaks are provided in a range of ways, depending on the level of need:

1.1 Universal services

These are services which are offered to all members of the community and can be accessed without the need for an assessment. These may include leisure centres, youth clubs, libraries, arts, and sports groups. These services may already have arrangements in place to deliver a more inclusive service for children with disabilities, or they may require advice and guidance on becoming more inclusive. Most children will benefit from universal services, although families may need advice from professionals to help them decide which activities are right for them.

Under schedule 3 of the Children and Families Act 2014, it is important that children and young people with disabilities have their needs identified and met as early as possible. When needs cannot be met via the universal offer, a Child and Family Assessment is used to determine what help the parent/ carer might require. Together with the family, we will then decide on the best form of support. This could be signposting, advice or provision of a service.

Figure 1: SEND short breaks provision model



1.2 Targeted services

Targeted services are designed for CYP with disabilities, recognising that some children require extra support to take part in activities. Targeted services may include activities that are open to all children and young people, with extra staff for disabled children to ensure that

all CYP are able to participate fully. They may also include smaller group sizes or activities that are put on especially for children who meet the eligibility criteria.

1.3 Specialist services

A smaller number of children will have more complex needs and disability requirements that can only be met by specialist services. These services might include residential, or family overnight breaks, floating support, or direct payments where families are given the funding to buy the required support, such as employing a personal assistant (PA) to support with family routines. Floating support is practical assistance in the home including home based short breaks/respite. It is much like direct payments, except that the services are commissioned directly by the local authority.

2. Legal and policy context

2.1 Duty to provide short breaks

In performing their duty, under schedule 2 of the Children Act 1989, The Breaks for Carers of Disabled Children Regulations 2011, and The Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970 (Legislation.gov.uk, 2009); local authorities must provide a range of services which is sufficient to assist parents/ carers to continue to provide care, or to do so more effectively. Specifically, the local authority must provide, as appropriate, a range of:

- day-time care in the homes of disabled children or elsewhere,
- overnight care in the homes of disabled children or elsewhere,
- educational or leisure activities for disabled children outside their homes, and
- services available to assist parents/carers in the evenings, at weekends and during the school holidays.

In addition, local authorities must prepare a 'short breaks services statement' for parents/ carers in their area, setting out details of:

- the range of services available,
- any criteria by which eligibility for those services will be assessed and,
- how the range of services is designed to meet the needs of carers in their area.

The short breaks services statement must be published on the local authority website outlining the local offer; it must be kept under review and incorporate the views of local stakeholders such as parents and carers.

A draft short breaks statement for Medway was written in 2016, however the statement has not been published on The Council's website and the local offer is unclear. The short breaks statement is a legal requirement, which is urgently needed to define the universal, targeted and specialist offer and subsequent eligibility criteria ([recommendation 1](#)).

2.2 Policy context

2.2.1 Medway Council Strategy 2023 to 2024

The Council (no date a) Strategy is the Council's overarching strategy. It sets out our vision, priorities, ways of working and the outcomes we expect to achieve.

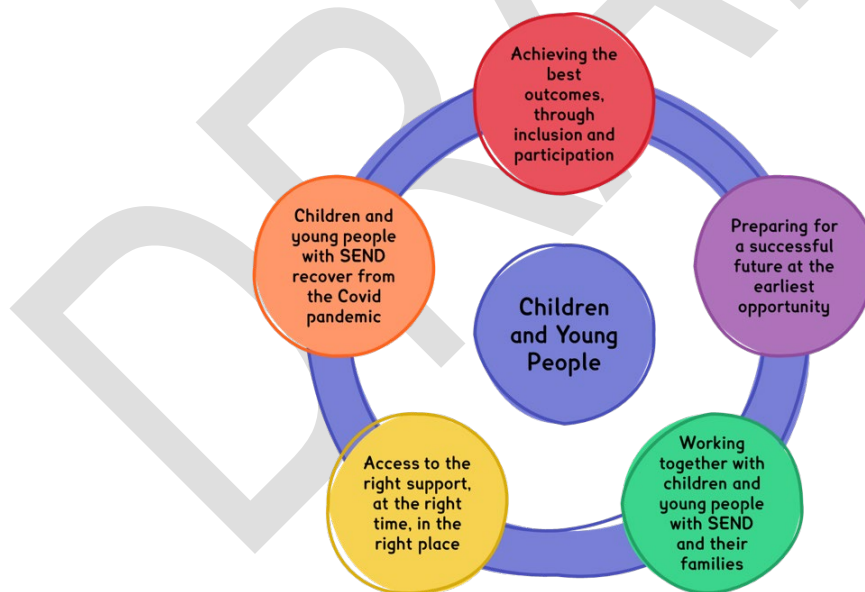
This sufficiency strategy contributes to Medway's overarching values and priorities:

- Working together to empower
 - healthy and active communities
 - resilient families
- Child friendly approaches and decisions
- Creating a culture of creativity and innovation

2.2.2 Medway Local Area Special Needs and/ or Disability (SEND) strategy 2022-25

Medway Council (no date b) continues to be ambitious for its children and young people with SEND. The SEND strategy focuses on inclusion, participation, aspiration, and achievement. The short breaks sufficiency strategy contributes to all 5 of the 2022-2025 ambitions identified in the SEND strategy.

Figure 2: Medway Local area SEND strategy ambitions for 2022-25



2.2.3 Medway Parenting Support Strategy 2021-2031

Medway Council (no date, c) identifies parents as the single most significant influence on children's emotional and physical wellbeing, educational attainment, and behaviour. Our recommendations for achieving sufficiency, contribute to many of the expected outcomes identified in the parenting support strategy, such as:

- parents and professionals know where and how to get the support needed
- parents can access services easily and value the services they are receiving

2.2.4 Medway children and young people's (draft) plan 2023-25

Medway Council's (no date, d) Children and Young People's Plan sets out how we will work together with our partners. The short breaks sufficiency recommendations will support:

- Children and young people to develop well
- Children and young people to become independent and fulfilled adults
- Children and young people and their families to participate in and contribute to their community

3. Current services

In England, some families with children aged 2-3 may be entitled to 15 hours of childcare if certain government eligibility criteria are met. Many families with children aged 3-4 may be entitled to 30 hours free childcare under the national free childcare scheme. Although they may require advice and signposting on how to access this.

3.1 Overview of the Medway Local Offer

Most children aged 5 and over with mild to moderate needs can have their needs met by universal services and do not need an assessment to access these. The voluntary and community sector (VCS) also offers a range of inclusive activities in Medway and the surrounding areas.

The targeted offer can be accessed through a successful short break application and assessment. A child and family assessment might also be required to determine whether the child and family are eligible for additional targeted and/ or specialist support.

An overview of the current range of services offered by Medway Council is listed in the table below.

3.1.1 Overview of Council funded short breaks support services

Universal (for children with mild needs)

Medway Youth Services are provided throughout the year for all children as part of the universal offer. There are specific sessions for children with SEND: Shine (for 10–18-year-olds), and Wednesday Squad (for 16–25-year-olds).

Medway Go provide holiday activities for children aged 4-16 years. These sessions are only available to children entitled to free school meals and those with SEND. Sessions include dance, art, sports, animal experiences, computer skills and lots more.

Medway Sport offers inclusive activities such as disability youth games, swimming lessons, sensory swim sessions, dance, arts and sports clubs as part of their leisure offer.

Child Friendly Medway is another new initiative providing inclusive activities for children and families such as fun days, sensory and messy play, community story time and craft activities. Often no need to book.

Targeted (for children with mild to moderate needs)

ROCC is provided in collaboration with Rivermead Inclusive Trust. ROCC is a specialist provider of holiday clubs for children and young people aged 5-25 with SEND. Seasonal activities are provided on and off-site. Families can self-refer for places which are either self-funded or secured by direct payments.

The short breaks grant (direct payment/ self-directed support payment) is a fixed amount (£500-£1000) which is paid annually to fund services such as a PA or access leisure activities such as days out, clubs, ROCC or similar play schemes.

Dragons Retreat is an independent registered children's home in Hextable, providing overnight care for CYP up to the age of 18 years. A small number of families receive direct payments or a floating support package to fund access to this service.

Specialist (for children with severe and profound needs)

Direct payments vary in amount and duration. They are usually paid in instalments to fund the cost of employing a PA, which may be an extended family member, someone else known to the family or provided by an agency. For children with very complex needs 2:1 care may be required.

Parklands after school club provides small group-based care for 5–18-year-olds with complex needs (not currently running). A referral is required from 0-25 disability team.

Floating support services are agreed at panel following an assessment and commissioned directly by Medway Council. Specialist 1:1 or 2:1 care is provided in the homes of vulnerable children and out in the community.

Council run short breaks home – Parklands, provides overnight respite for 5–18-year-olds with complex needs such as PEG feeding, personal care, and mobility challenges. Only available upon referral from 0-25 disability team.

3.2 Further information on the short breaks grant

The short breaks grant (also known as direct payments or self-direct support) was introduced by Medway Council in 2016 to allow families to exercise more control and choice regarding their short breaks, as set out in the Children and Families Act 2014. To ensure that the Council's limited resources are used most effectively, eligibility criteria were also agreed by Cabinet.

We apply The Equality Act (Gov.uk, 2013) definition of a disability:

'A person has a disability if s/he has a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to perform normal day to day activities.'

If the child is diagnosed with a disability and is in receipt of DLA, the child and family are entitled to one of three levels of direct payments. The payment varies, depending on whether the disability has either:

- Little or no impact on family and/or minimal risk of family breakdown (Level 1) - £500
- Moderate impact upon family and/or possible risk of family breakdown (Level 2) - £750
- Significant/major impact on family and/or significant risk of breakdown (Level 3) - £1000

The annual short breaks grant is awarded by the self-directed support (SDS) team as a one-off payment into a managed account or onto a prepaid card. The arrangement and expenditure are reviewed annually to determine whether the package is still appropriate.

3.3 Local offer review

The Local Offer website (Council, M, no date e) which is a mandatory requirement for the Council to have and maintain is currently incomplete and requires updating as much of the information dates back from 2019 to include some of the newer services which are listed above, as well as activities and events organised by the VCS, such as Puzzles, Square Pegs Arts and Medway Parent and Carer Forum (MPCF). Community activities like these can be funded using direct payments. However, as these are not commissioned services there is no quality assurance in place, nor does Medway Council have any influence over how providers organise their services. The local offer information also needs reviewing to understand whether the providers listed are still in service, which level of need they can meet and if there are any new services emerging that could be added to highlight the full range of activities available to families.

Keeping the local offer up to date would ensure that professionals and parents/carers are aware of the breadth of statutory and community support available and how to access those services. Increasing choice and flexibility over how families can use their direct payments. Undertaking quality assurance of local provision would increase confidence in those services ([recommendation 6.2](#)).

4. Local Need

There are 69,800 children and young people (aged 0-19 years) living in Medway, up (1.15%) from 69,000 in 2011 (Council, M, no date f). According to PHE (2020), in Medway, 17.6% of school children had SEND, which is similar to the South East Region (17.6%) and is higher than the England average (17.3%).

There is not a register of all disabled children or those with a long-term condition in Medway. The 2011 Census found that 5.3% of CYP aged 0 to 19 had a long-term health problem or disability which limited their day-to-day activities. Medway was higher than the local authority peer group but below the national average.

In 2022 in Medway there were 4026 children and young people with Disability Living Allowance (DLA) entitlement (Stat-xplore.dwp.gov.uk, no date), compared with 3,595 in May 2018, representing a 10.7% increase. Disability Living Allowance (DLA) is paid to help with the extra costs of looking after a child who has difficulties walking or needs much more looking after than a child of the same age who does not have a disability. The rate of payment varies between £26.90 - £172.50 per week. Those entitled to DLA are sorted into one of 29 categories for the main disabling condition, which could be related to physical,

social, emotional and or speech and language needs. This criteria does not tell us enough about the impact of the disability on the child and family's health and wellbeing. This impact should be assessed in full by the SDS team and the exact criteria needs to be made clear in our short breaks statement.

Figure 3: Breakdown of children and young people with DLA entitlement

Age bands	Under 5	5-10 years	11-15 years	16-17 years	18-24 years	Total
Number with entitlement	330	1652	1816	204	24	4026

In July 2023, in Medway there were 2948 children with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), which has increased by 42% since 2015 (Council, M, no date d) and is higher than the national average. Our modelling predicts the number of CYP with an EHCP will to rise to 3292 by January 2026.

The most common types of need for children with a statement or EHC plan, are autism spectrum disorder (32.2%), and speech, language, and communication needs (18.4%). In addition, social, emotional, and mental health problems (15.2%), moderate learning difficulties (9.1%) and severe learning difficulty (8.7%) are common. Physical disability accounts for 4.0% of all pupils identified with an EHCP. Hearing and visual impairment account for 1.7% and 1.0% respectively.

There is a clear step in educational attainment between children without SEN, those on SEN support and those with an EHCP across early years and key stages of the national curriculum. This is the case in Medway and nationally. There is still a high level of exclusions from Medway schools, although this is improving. There is a low proportion of children with an EHCP placed in mainstream education. The rate of asthma admissions in young children (aged under 10) is 30% higher than the England average, which is likely due to poor inhaler technique and lack of understanding of possible triggers.

The number of children with SEND is rising. Over recent years, waiting times for assessment and treatment for neurodevelopmental conditions has been high but this is improving. This strategy is needed to ensure ongoing sustainability and sufficiency of short breaks provision in Medway. Failure to adequately address the learning needs of children and young people hinders their ability to fulfil their potential in terms of educational attainment and future employment prospects but also has an impact on the quality of life of both the individual and their family. As there are poorer outcomes across every measure for Children and Young People with SEND (Council, M, no date e).

5. Demand

Having reviewed the available data across the system in Medway it is apparent that this is an under-developed area of knowledge and it is difficult to understand current and future demand accurately due to the huge variability in how families access services, and the way this is reported. The table below provides information about how families are accessing Medway services.

Figure 4: Breakdown of number of children accessing services available in Medway

Medway Go holiday activities (2022)	One off short breaks payment (2023/24)	Holiday day care at ROCC	Direct payments (3 year average)	Overnight respite at Parklands (2023/24)
457	1177	156	146*	38

* This includes regular and one-off payments

5.1 Medway Go/ Holiday and Food Programme (HAF)

Attendance at Medway GO sessions has increased steadily since Easter 2022. A significant proportion (20%) of the children who attend Medway Go, have SEND. Activities for children with disabilities include ROCC play scheme, trampolining, computer coding and SENDTIVATE play scheme. Medway GO is organised and financed by Medway Public Health.

5.2 Short breaks grant

In October 2023, there were a total of 1177 children in the system for short breaks (935 renewals and 242 applications). This a 68% increase on the numbers presented to Overview and Scrutiny in 2016 when the short breaks grant was introduced to replace community-based services. The 2022/23 spend on short breaks was £624,881 against a budget of £491,202.

5.3 Rivermead Outreach Community Challenge (ROCC)

ROCC is a well-established and trusted provider, offering specialist day care services for up to 150 children in each of the school holidays. Families access the service by paying for it themselves or using income from short breaks or direct payments. Places are allocated on a first come first served basis and this includes Kent families with the ability to pay.

5.4 Direct Payments

Analysis of data available shows that on average there are ~146 families in receipt of direct payments each year. One-off payments range from £92 to £1,000 annually. Ongoing weekly payments range from £24.53 to £399.85 per week. Payments can either be made into a managed account or onto a prepaid account. Information is limited without a deep dive into each client's page as to what direct payments are being used for.

5.5 Parklands short breaks home

Parklands short breaks home is a Council run provision and has capacity to offer 24 nights of respite for up to 70 children (aged 5 to 18 years) per annum. However, only 38 children are receiving regular respite breaks at Parklands due to recruitment and retention challenges. Therefore, the cost per child per night increases from £600 to £1000 when there are 2 empty beds (on average). However, for quality assurance reasons Parklands' statement of purpose does not permit the use of agency staff and so sufficiency issues

remain. Parklands is not currently running an afterschool club for the same reasons. This is having an impact on requests for floating support and direct payments.

6. Income and Expenditure

The limited choice and availability of targeted services, together with reduced availability of specialist care at Parklands, has resulted in an over-reliance on floating support and direct payments with significant cost implications over the years, as shown below.

Figure 5: Expenditure for targeted and specialist short breaks services

Service type	2022/23 (actual) [£]	2023/24 (actual) [£]	2024/25 (forecast) [£]
Parklands short break home	743,794**	816,689**	959,916**
Parklands after school club	7,108	6,555	79,748
Short breaks grant payments	425,320	603,419	645,000
Direct payments	896,647	781,362	610,981
Floating support	522,351	212,873	30,940
Total	2,595,220	2,420,899	2,326,585

**There is an additional contribution from the ICB of £381,501 (which is not formalised),

Direct payments are often used to employ a personal advisor (PA), often at 2:1 when needs could be met on a 1:1 basis or even in small groups when care is delivered in specialist provisions. The overall costs of activities for children with disabilities are determined by the level of support required by the child and the number of staff required to provide that care. Some examples of the staffing costs are provided below, in comparison to the cost of arranging a PA or floating support.

Figure 6: Comparison of short breaks costs

Ratio of staff to CYP (for a 7hr session)	Staff cost 1:3	Staff cost 1:2	Staff cost 1:1	Staff cost 2:1
Medway GO	£96	-	£107	-
ROCC	£72	£82	£112	£200
PA service/ floating support	-	-	£138.25 - £245	£276.50 - £490
Parklands Respite	£34 - 51.38	£51.10 - 77.07	£102.2 - 154.14	£204 - 308.28

Increasing the availability of ROCC and respite at Parklands using the short breaks innovation fund, will reduce reliance on PAs, generating savings of up to 37%, (depending on the care ratio). These savings should remain in the short breaks budget and used to commission a range of targeted services.

7. Sufficiency opportunities

7.1 Medway Go

Communication and engagement activities carried out during summer 2023 indicate that many families are accessing ROCC activities funded by Medway GO and receiving the short breaks grant and/ or direct payments to fund additional sessions with ROCC. This results in inequitable access because not all families are aware of, or able secure a place on the full range of services.

We recognise that children and young people with disabilities can have specialist support requirements that can't be met by schemes like Medway GO and youth activities. Where possible, staff should encourage and support parents and carers to access universal services. We need to continue working in partnership with universal services by offering free training and support to enable greater access for CYP with disabilities, and their families, and to ensure the provision of appropriate support ([recommendation 2 and 3](#)).

7.2 Short Breaks grant

There are now additional services that were not available in 2016 when the grant was launched, such as Medway GO and Child Friendly Medway as well as a number of external new provisions. These services have some inclusive activities delivered in smaller groups. The needs of children on the lower rate of short breaks funding are likely to be met by working together with these services to ensure these providers are appropriately trained and resourced to deliver a sufficient offer for children with disabilities.

Analysis showed that of the families in receipt of the short breaks funding, ~9% of the families received another direct payment funded by the 0-25 disability team. This equated to £68,500 of the total short breaks expenditure at that time. There will be some families that are receiving overnight respite at Parklands and/ or floating support services as well.

The short breaks grant is a preventative service and should be offered as one of the local offer options to prevent families coming into the system. Therefore, if families are accessing short breaks through another system or service, they would not be eligible to continue with the short breaks grant and payments should cease. A co-ordinated approach to the delivery, review and scrutiny of direct payments and short breaks is needed to ensure that limited resources are used efficiently and effectively.

Comparison with other areas indicates that our eligibility criteria is more relaxed and that our payments are greater. For example, Stockton-on-Tees and Sheffield local authorities award £400 per annum and the latter is means tested. South Tyneside offer £300 per annum and reserve the right to close the scheme if the budget is exhausted. Local Authorities with grant

schemes in place have clear guidance outlining how the funds can be utilised. These areas only award grants to children and families who are in receipt of middle or higher rate DLA.

Medway should consider removing the lower tier funding and redirect this into commissioning. Eligibility should focus on children who have a diagnosed disability and are in receipt of DLA, rather than using the and/or eligibility criteria. A review of each of the bandings is recommended with the suggestion that each of the bandings is reduced by £250. This would generate ~£200,000 in savings that could be reinvested. The introduction of the Children's Commissioning Team presents an opportunity to have a blend of commissioned services and self-directed support to achieve sufficiency and alleviate some of the pressure on the SDS team. Medway should explore how introducing the Max Card would allow families to make their money go further.

There is considerable variation in how families spend their short breaks allocation. The 2016 Cabinet paper defines the outcomes (listed in section 3.2) that short breaks are designed to achieve, however it does not define which activities qualify for a direct payment. Scrutiny of short break grants indicates some inappropriate spending, such as using it to purchase a washing machine or paying for leisure passes for the whole family rather than just the CYP with disabilities and their carer ([recommendation 4](#)).

Robust inclusion criteria should be defined and published with the local offer to increase transparency and accountability. Depending on the co-ordinator doing the telephone evaluation or the social worker completing the application, the quality of support plans varies. Consideration should be taken to modifying the Mosaic forms to include mandatory fields to justify how the budget would address the needs of the young person ([recommendation 5](#)). This will also ease the amount of administration that the SDS team are required to do.

7.3 ROCC

In October 2023, Medway was allocated £385,000 in funding from the DfE short breaks innovation programme to expand services for children with disabilities. Specifically, Medway will be working in partnership with ROCC:

- to offer an additional 100 places throughout the school holidays,
- to develop a specialist term-time provision (after school and on Saturdays) for up to 50 children,
- to develop an accredited work experience programme for up to 10 young adults with SEND that doubles up as daycare.

This partnership will allow Medway to have more influence over how the service is organised so that:

- Children in Medway are given priority over anywhere else,
- Places are allocated based on need rather than ability to pay,
- The scheme is delivered in collaboration with Medway Go to ensure fair access,
- SDS admin responsibilities are reduced.

7.4 Direct Payments

Over half of direct payments are made in addition to the short breaks grant. Some families appear to be receiving a direct payment and they may also be receiving floating support. The Access to Resources Team (ART) have advised that requests for support have increased by 60%, which is making it difficult to find enough provision.

Further investigation reveals that in some cases, the provider that some families are using to deliver personal care is not registered with the Care Quality Commission; this raises quality assurance concerns; even though direct payment mitigates the liability, it could be argued that the local authority has not assisted the client and their family in locating the appropriate support. Consideration should be given to the usage of direct payments to purchase respite services and if this could be commissioned directly via the floating support framework to improve quality assurance oversight. Similarly, when a child or young person becomes a child in care for most of the year, such as when they enter a 38-week residential school, new criteria could be applied for the eligibility of direct payments.

Support plans are routinely reviewed as highlighted in Medway's policies at 4 months, 10 months and then annually by the auditing team, although individual support plans lack insight into what the clients' needs are and how they are going to be met with the financial support. Consideration should be given to moving to the reapplying method rather than reviewing to ensure support plans include detailed information about needs and to ensure that children's services input is captured during the review process.

7.5 Parklands short breaks home

Ofsted (Inspection of Medway local authority children's services (2023) noted Medway's recruitment challenges, leader's steps to address these and the need for work to continue. In October 2023, Medway was awarded £164,228 (plus £94,433.75 mobilisation budget) in funding from the DfE short breaks innovation programme for a workforce development project (subject to contract), to address long-standing recruitment and retention challenges.

Medway plans to use this grant alongside the apprenticeship levy to create a sustainable, flexible, and well-trained local workforce of 12 apprentices who will be working towards the level 4 CYP and families practitioner apprenticeship. This extra capacity will enable us to reconsider how the care packages are offered and provide support to other short breaks provisions where required, ensuring continuity of practice and skills and greater choice and flexibility to our families. In addition, we aim to ensure that at least 50% of the apprenticeships are offered to care leavers. It will also have a positive impact on floating support and direct payment requests.

Currently, the eligibility criteria for parklands is not shared in the standard operating procedure. The review presents an opportunity to review the criteria and share this with referring professionals so that the provision is being utilised to its full potential.

7.6 Social prescribing

This review demonstrates variability in carers' knowledge of the range of services, resulting in equitable access to the offer. Social prescribing connects children and families with services that can meet the family's social, emotional, and practical needs, often through the support of a link worker. It would be important to include social prescribing as a key part of

this work so we can grow and strengthen their contribution. They see the gaps and barriers first hand and would be vital in sharing this intelligence.

7.7 Support for families (Family Hubs)

Outward facing area inclusion teams will be based in each of the family hubs. These teams will work alongside the existing hub teams to provide joined up support for families in all aspects of Education from Early years through to Post 16/ 19.

Inclusion teams will manage the caseloads and determine the most appropriate professional to lead with each family. Creating multi-disciplinary teams facilitates the flow of information and coordination of response, centred around the child and family.

Being located together in the community, enables improved communication with families so that they are more aware of and supported to access the required support.

7.8 Summary

There is a need to develop a co-ordinated approach and structured data collection to inform ongoing delivery, review and scrutiny of short breaks and direct payments to ensure that budgets are being used effectively. Efficiency savings can be made by working in partnership with other services to develop a data sharing agreement, or upgrading data intelligence systems to accurately understand the breadth of services that families are accessing; and explore the opportunities for joint commissioning. Keeping to these principles would ensure tighter control of the budget and reduce administration; reducing the time that families wait to receive their assessment/ review and subsequent payment.

8. Engagement and consultation

A 12-week engagement period was held between 24th July and 13th October 2023. The approach was to engage as many people as possible online. We had 193 responses from parents and carers to our online survey, this has meant that the response is statistically valid.

Face-to-face consultation events included visiting ROCC, Parklands and some of the Medway GO SEND sessions to observe the sessions and listen to the children and young people's views on the local offer, in addition to our survey. We also organised coffee mornings and drop-ins to coincide with our visits and pick up/ drop off so that parents could talk to us in groups or one-to one. We paid particular attention to engaging groups who find it harder to access services. Our presence led to several follow up emails and/ or phone calls from parents who wanted to discuss their views in more detail.

Overall, children and their carers were positive about the services on offer, however there were some issues identified during the consultation which could be addressed through training and effective communication.

During the consultation period, we also met with the following services and teams to understand more about the benefits and challenges of short breaks and/or, ideas for improvement and inclusive opportunities:

Figure 7: Stakeholders who took part in the consultation

In scope	Outside of scope
Medway Parent and carer forum (MPCF)	We are Beams/ Dragons Retreat
Children' services management team	Lower Grange Farm
0-25 disability team	SENDTIVATE
Self-directed support team	Jam Coding
Access to resources team	Squirrels riding centre
Parklands short break home	Curly's farm
ROCC	Creepy claws
Medway Green School	Eternal lakes
Medway Culture and Education Partnership	Jimmy's Tennis
Medway Youth Service	Anchorians equal team
Child Friendly Medway	Kent wildlife trust
Medway Sport	
Medway theatres team	

The self-directed support team collated feedback from families which has been shared with us to highlight the benefits of short breaks.

'A young man used the short breaks funding to pay for horse riding lessons as a child and now that he is an adult he works at Cheltenham race course helping to train the horses.'

'A family used the funding to pay for a sensory dog as the child wouldn't leave the house or even go in the garden. The dog has made such a difference as the girl now attends appointments (along with the dog), spends time in the garden and goes to school. When she is feeling anxious, the dog seems to sense it and will go and sit with her.'

'A young girl, didn't like to access the community or socialise with her peers but she used the funding to pay for a photography course. Teaching her a new skill and enabled her to socialise outside of school.'

Members of MPCF have suggested that following the i-THRIVE model that is already in place for mental health and emotional wellbeing services would be a useful way of supporting families to navigate the local offer. We may be able to use the in-train platform or it might be worth exploring the Simply Connect platform.

Figure 8: Medway i-THRIVE approach for navigating the support that children need to thrive



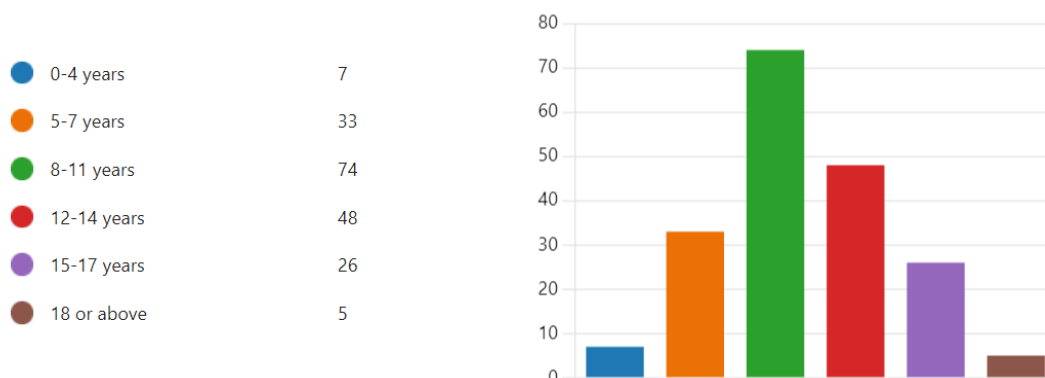
Partnership Commissioning are currently exploring the digital offers available to families across health, education and social care with a view to support easier navigation between these sites. These developments align with the suggestion from MPCF, so it would be important to work collaboratively.

8.1 Consultation Findings

8.1.1 General information

Almost 40% of respondents had children aged 8-11 years. Respondents were predominantly from Gillingham and Chatham, followed by Strood and Rainham. In 60% of responses, their child's primary diagnosis was autism, followed by ADHD/ ADD and severe learning difficulties.

Figure 9: Age distribution of the respondents' children

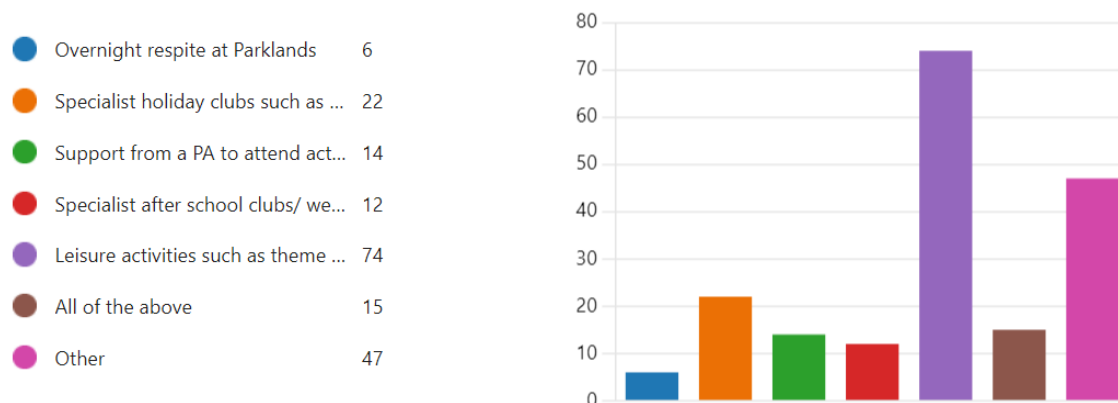


8.1.2 How families utilise the short breaks grant

Almost half (45%) of respondents used their payments to access leisure activities such as soft play, bowling, theatre trips and cinema. Almost a quarter of respondents selected other when describing how they spend their payments. Responses from 50 carers indicated that parents/ carers used the money to pay for garden improvements, electronic devices, specialist, and sensory equipment, learning aids, eating out, employing a carer, and breaks away. Many families used the money to pay for swimming lessons which not only provides a short break but also enables the development of essential life skills.

Some families used their payment in conjunction with other schemes to maximise the benefits, for example using the money towards a trip with the Scouts/ Guides/ youth services and going on holiday with a charity. Like our own sampling of support plans, some of the purchases were not essential to the wellbeing of the carer or care recipient, providing further evidence for recommendation 6.4.

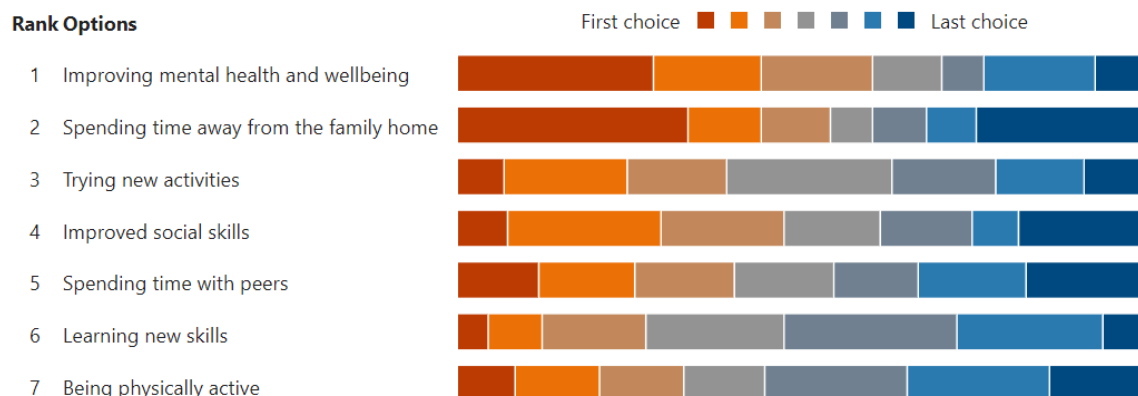
Figure 10: How respondents are currently accessing short breaks provision



8.1.3 How families benefit from short breaks provision

Improving mental health and wellbeing, and spending time away from the family home were the top priorities for parents of children with disabilities.

Figure 11: Respondents' self-assessed benefits of short breaks provision for their child



There were 118 written responses, where carers commented on how the break benefits their family by providing the CYP with:

- a sense of independence
- a break from siblings and subsequent disagreements
- the chance to try new things, develop life skills and have the same opportunities as their siblings/ peers
- relief from hypermobility
- improved confidence, speech, and language skills
- fitness for cystic fibrosis

Many families said that they used the funds to cover the cost of bringing an additional carer on a family break that they would not have been able to take without the funding. Some described the grant as a 'lifeline' or a 'god send.' Time to rest and recharge and spend time with other children were the main benefits that parents described in the qualitative analysis.

8.1.4 Accessing information about short breaks

The poll has shown that parents and carers usually access information about short breaks via MPCF, newsletter or the council website. Throughout the survey there were comments from parents who said they did not know what was available. This does emphasise the need to keep the information about the local offer up to date and communicate this to stakeholders such as family solutions, education and social prescribing, so they are able to advise and inform parents (recommendation 6.3).

In their written answers some respondents said that they didn't know how to access information about short breaks and that a newsletter or update via email (64%) or social media would be helpful. In doing this survey, we have seen the power of communicating with clients who are already registered with short breaks so it would be easy to disseminate information in the same way.

'I access through the parent and carers forum. I feel email would be accessible to all as not everyone is on the parent and carers forum.'

'It would be great to get an email with what's available as I don't always check social media and find websites hard to navigate at times.'

8.1.5 Considerations for commissioning

More than 75% of respondents said that they drive their child to the short break activities and over 63% of carers would be willing to travel 20-30 miles for the right activity.

Specialist holiday clubs and term-time play schemes were their highest priority. Most carers (65%) wanted a combination of weekend and after-school support, but weekends were a higher priority than after school. Outdoor, physical activities and animal care were of greater importance to carers than creative skills such as music and computing. Discounts on leisure activities were favoured by many families, so this is something that could be explored through the Max Card, our own services, and negotiating with local providers.

Respondents felt that inclusive activities weren't inclusive enough and therefore were in favour of keeping the existing direct payments model. However, some carers also said the current grant system is difficult to manage, there are limited options for short breaks and that the cost per session is unsustainable. Many families were keen to share the benefits of their short breaks experience and recognised the advantage of having more services available and the social opportunities this would create for children and parents alike.

Some respondents (41%) were against making any changes and viewed the review as an efficiency measure. Whilst others felt their child would not manage in group sessions and highlighted that it isn't always possible to schedule activities in advance due to the complexity of their child's needs. Carers were keen to express how carefully commissioned activities are needed to meet the wide variety of needs, offer choice, and maintain flexibility.

Over half of respondents were either in agreement or had neutral feelings about reviewing the way that direct payments were organised. Some respondents expressed their need to have more information on the proposed model and associated activities to make their decision. Most respondents provided their contact information which will allow us to co-produce the new model. The hybrid commissioning model proposed in 9.6 maintains the flexibility and choice of direct payments whilst increasing the availability of provision.

9. Summary of recommendations

Recommendation 1 – Co-produce a short break statement

Co-produce a short breaks statement, which clearly outlines the universal, targeted and specialist services available for CYP with disabilities in Medway. The statement should be published on Medway Council's website and kept under review. This needs to be undertaken as soon as possible.

Recommendation 2 – Revamp and update the local offer website and signposting mechanisms

The Local Offer information requires updating from 2019 to ensure that it is accurate and representative of the breadth of statutory and community support available in the local areas.

As many services are not commissioned, the local authority should undertake quality assurance of local provision to increase confidence in those services. Where minimum standards are not met, training, advice and guidance should be provided to support providers in becoming more inclusive.

Recommendation 3 – Invest in training and improved communication to parents and carers

The need for training is twofold. The Council should work with providers such as Medway GO, Medway sport, and other local clubs and services to further improve access for children and young people with disabilities, through free and comprehensive training to increase skills and knowledge. This will ensure that staff have a thorough understanding of the strategies that can be used to support children with varying levels of need. Utilising the short breaks innovation fund, the commissioning team can work with providers to ensure activities are appropriately resourced to meet the needs of a proportion of children with mild to moderate SEND.

Regular training and updates are needed for staff to ensure that they have the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively manage direct payments and short breaks. This could include training on eligibility criteria, budget management, support planning, effective communication with care recipients and ensuring that records are kept up to date on both Mosaic and Integra. Within that, we need to develop consistent terminology for short breaks.

The role of social prescribers and partnerships with stakeholders such as MPCF also provides a key opportunity for communicating the local offer as it develops.

Recommendation 4 - Review short breaks eligibility and inclusion criteria

Eligibility should focus on children who have a diagnosed disability and are in receipt of DLA, rather than using the and/or eligibility criteria. Consideration should be given to moving to the reapplying method rather than reviewing to ensure support plans include detailed information about needs and to ensure that children's services input is captured during the review process.

A review of inclusion criteria inline with surrounding areas is urgently needed. Robust inclusion criteria should be defined and published with the local offer to increase transparency and accountability for how show breaks payments are spent.

Further, a review of each of the bandings is recommended, with the suggestion that each of the bandings is reduced by £250 and that the level 1 payment is substituted with priority access to the universal offer. Generating ~£200,000 savings that could be reinvested into commissioned services to achieve sufficiency and reduce the amount of administration carried out by SDS team. Medway should explore how introduction of the Max Card would allow families to make their money go further.

Recommendation 5 – Invest in data Intelligence

There is a need to develop a co-ordinated approach to the ongoing delivery, review and scrutiny of short breaks and direct payments to ensure that budgets are being used effectively.

Consideration should be taken to modifying the Mosaic forms to include mandatory fields to justify how the budget would address the needs of the young person. In addition, we need to develop an intuitive reporting mechanism on Mosaic that enables us to run reports on the total package of care that families are receiving ([recommendation 6.5](#)).

Recommendation 6 – Develop more approved commissioned services

Consideration should be given to the usage of direct payments to purchase respite services and if this could be commissioned directly via the floating support framework to improve quality assurance oversight, budget control and forecasting. This would reduce the administrative burden for families and staff; it would however reduce the flexibility that direct payments were implemented to provide. Therefore, this option would need to be widely consulted on.

Similarly, we also need a choice of targeted services for holiday and term-time provision in Medway. These services would be commissioned using the savings delivered by the other recommendations and income from the short breaks innovation fund. This would increase choice, value for money, and ensure fair uptake of places by families with the greatest need. Having a core offer of targeted services would allow Medway to move to a hybrid model for short breaks that allows families to select a combination of commissioned services and direct payments.

Recommendation 7 – Address recruitment and retention challenges

Recruitment and retention is a challenge across many services. In October 2023, Medway was awarded £164,228 in funding from the DfE short breaks innovation programme for a workforce development project (subject to contract), to address long-standing recruitment and retention challenges.

Medway plans to use this grant alongside the apprenticeship levy to create a sustainable, flexible and well-trained local workforce of 12 apprentices who will be working towards the level 4 CYP and families practitioner apprenticeship. This extra capacity will enable us to reconsider how the care packages are offered and provide support to other short breaks provisions where required, ensuring continuity of practice and skills and greater choice and flexibility to our families.

Medway should also consider the recruitment of internal fostering short breaks carers to increase the availability and choice of overnight respite options.

Acknowledgements

- James Harman, Head of Children's Services Commissioning
- Stephanie Brown, Children's Commissioning Programme Lead for Education
- Mandy Lawson, Designated Social Care Officer and Interim Service Manager Children and Young People with Disabilities (CYPD)
- Catherine Harper, Senior Self-Directed Support Co-ordinator
- Medway Parent and Carer Forum

- Caren Smith, Children's Home Registered Manager – Short Breaks (Parklands)
- Samuel Robinson, Programme Lead for Panels and Processes
- Neil Stollery, Management Accountant (Education)
- Lisa Dyer, Management Accountant
- Dawn Marsh, Finance Business Partner, Adult Social Care
- Emma Block, Partnership Commissioning Programme Lead, Children and Adults

DRAFT

10. References

Legislation.gov.uk (2012a). *The Children Act 1989, schedule 2*. [online] Available at: [Children Act 1989 legislation](#) (accessed 17 November 2023)

Legislation.gov.uk (2012b). *The Breaks for Carers of Disabled Children Regulations 2011*. [online] Available at: [Breaks for carers of disabled children regulations](#) (accessed 17 November 2023)

Short breaks for Carers of Disabled Children Departmental Advice for Local Authorities 2011. [online] Available at: [Department for Education downloads](#) accessed 17 November 2023)

Legislation.gov.uk (2009). *The Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970*. [online] Available at: [Chronically sick and disabled persons act](#) (accessed 17 November 2023)

Council, M (no date a). *Medway Council Strategy 2023 to 2024*. [online] Available at: [Medway Council Strategy 2023 to 2024](#) (accessed 17 November 2023)

Council, M (no date b). *Medway strategy for children and young people with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) 2022 to 2025*. [online] Available at: [Medway strategy for children and young people with SEND 2022 to 2025](#) (accessed 17 November 2023)

Council, M (no date c). *Medway Parenting Support Strategy for 2021 to 2031*. [online] Available at: [Medway parenting support strategy for 2021 to 2031](#) (accessed 17 November 2023)

Council, M (no date d). *Medway Children and Young People's Plan 2023-2025*. [online] Available at: [Medway Children and Young People's Plan 2023-2025](#) (accessed 17 November 2023)

Council, M (no date e). *Social care for children and young people with SEND (local offer)*. [online] Available at: [Medway local offer](#) (accessed 17 November 2023)

Council, M (no date f). *Medway's Joint Strategic Needs Assessment for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities*. [online] Available at: [Medway JSNA for SEND](#) (accessed 5 December 2023).

Gov.uk (2013). Equality Act 2010 [online] GOV.UK. Available at: [Equality Act](#) (accessed 17 November 2023)

PHE (2020) *Improving health outcomes for vulnerable children and young people Report for Medway* published on PHE fingertips September 2020 (accessed 17 November 2023)

Stat-xplore.dwp.gov.uk (no date). Stat-xplore – Log in. [online] Available at: [DWP benefit statistics](#) (accessed 17 November 2023)

Inspection of Medway local authority children's services (2023). [online] Available at: [Ofsted reports](#) (accessed 17 November 2023)

Gov.uk (2023). *Disability Living Allowance (DLA) for Children DLA*. [online] Available at: [Benefits and financial support](#)

DRAFT