

## **Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**6 March 2025**

### **Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Education**

Report presented by: Councillor Tracy Coombs, Portfolio Holder for Education

#### **Summary**

This annual report provides an account of the role of the Portfolio Holder for Education. It details their ambitions for their areas of responsibility, how they have and will undertake political challenge and leadership and what their priorities and ambitions are for the year ahead.

#### **1. Recommendation**

1.1. The Committee are asked to note the report.

#### **2. Budget and policy framework**

2.1. The areas within the terms of reference of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and covered by the Portfolio Holder, as set out in the Council's constitution are:

- Adult Learning and Skills
- Attendance
- Elective Home Education
- Children missing education.
- Early Years
- Education Safeguarding
- Further Education
- Liaison between Further and Higher Education and Schools
- Quality of Education: Primary and Secondary Education
- Mainstream School Sufficiency
- Mainstream School Transport
- Early Careers Teachers
- Post 16 participation (including children not in education, employment and training)
- School Organisation and Capital Projects
- School Services (including Admissions and Medway Test)
- Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), Including SEND Transport

### 3. Background

- 3.1. I was delighted to be appointed to the role of Portfolio Holder for Education when the Labour Co Operative Group took over the administration of the Council in May 2023. Since then, I have been working closely with early years settings, schools, the college, post 16 providers and the Education and SEND department at the council. We continue to strive for the highest quality inclusive education for all our children and young people, providing families with support and assistance. I would like to thank all our staff and partners for their hard work and continued commitment to driving improvement.
- 3.2. I have had the pleasure of visiting a variety of education providers over the last year; I have seen wonderful celebrations of success and have been able to hear about the challenges first hand. I work with our partners to ensure our priorities are aligned. These challenges include: The lower than national attainment in Medway from KS2 onwards; Low levels of literacy and communication issues, exacerbated by the pandemic; High levels of persistent absence; Increasing demand, in line with national changes, to childcare and wrap around provision for working families; and a growing demand for our school places; and provision for our children and young people with SEND.

### 4. Providing political leadership and challenge

- 4.1. I am a member of the Medway Education Partnership Group (MEPG). This group is a system leadership forum which provides education and wider system leaders with oversight and scrutiny across the key areas of education provision and performance in Medway. Members of the MEPG attend as representatives of their respective areas/agencies. Feedback from the stakeholder groups helps inform the priorities, which in turn underpins some of the activity of these stakeholder groups. The MEPG operates as a collaborative space across the partner network, allowing for sharing of good practice, timely identification of areas for development and jointly coordinated approaches to take action against areas of concern. All members of the MEPG hold a responsibility to share key messages within their professional networks.
- 4.2. I am a co-chair of the SEND Partnership Board. This board ensures the partnerships oversight and governance in driving the improvements to the local area SEND provision as outlined in our Joint Local Area Partnership improvement plan. This board is co-chaired by health and has representatives from all related partners across Health, social care, education, parents and carers and our young people.

- 4.3. I am a member of the Health and Wellbeing Board ensuring that the education inequalities that we see across Medway are being considered at every appropriate opportunity. Education and Skills is a key building block for health and wellbeing, and 'All children achieve a good level of education leading to secure employment in adulthood' is a key activity within one of the strategy's themes.
- 4.4. I am a member of the Children's Oversight Board, chaired by the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services (Lead Member). I ensure oversight of the effectiveness of education, and provide strong strategic leadership, support and challenge to the service. The Board is attended by Director of People, the Assistant Director for Education and SEND and Assistant Director Children's Social Care, and all Heads of Service. The board reviews performance data monthly. This provides an opportunity for me to challenge, question and better understand our compliance with statutory requirements across all service areas. Where there are identified shortfalls, I can question this with the operational managers and ensure they have plans in place to address this.
- 4.5. I am mindful of our role as a Council in ensuring a 'good' education for all children and young people in Medway. With this in mind, I regularly attend the termly meeting between the DfE South East Regional Group and Medway Council to ensure the provision for those attending academy trusts is maintained and improved as necessary. I am meeting with the Regional Director later in March to discuss this agenda further.
- 4.6. I attend Medway Parents and Carers Forum Liaison meeting and coffee mornings.
- 4.7. I regularly meet with the Assistant Director for Education and SEND, and the Strategic Heads of Education for Planning and Access, and Quality and Inclusion. I would like to thank them as well as their teams for the support they have given me over the past year since the election.

## 5. Championing the Interests of Children and Young People

- 5.1. I have actively supported the work of Child Friendly Medway which sets out a vision for making Medway a better place for children to live, learn, and contribute to our community. This has included attending several Town Hall events aimed at seeking the views of children and young people about the services they receive.
- 5.2. I regularly visit our schools and services in the community.
- 5.3. I am pleased to be able to celebrate the achievements of our children and young people in Medway and this year I have attended our Time to Shine Awards and our Youth Awards

## 6. Support for key service areas: **Adult Learning and Skills**

- 6.1. Medway Adult Education (MAE) has had a successful year delivering quality education and developing skills for residents in Medway. This year has seen continual growth for MAE, welcoming 4494 enrolments for 2160 individual learners in the 23/24 academic year, an increase from 3,858 enrolments for 2,080 individual learners in 22/23.
- 6.2. We saw growth in every curriculum area, with the most significant increases in Community Learning and Vocational Skills departments. The Community Learning team attended many events in the community offering short sessions to learners. This increased their reach and allowed more learners to complete activities with MAE. In partnership with the Public Health team, the Vocational Skills team have been delivering digital skills courses on the Hoo Peninsula for learners that may not have travelled to MAE centres. The team have also delivered new short Pathway to Employment courses to give learners the specific skills and resources they need to improve their employment opportunities.
- 6.3. MAE has successfully delivered the Multiply numeracy programme, bringing maths to our residents in a variety of different engaging ways. In 23/24 there were over 700 enrolments, with that figure set to grow in 24/25. Later this month we have the Multiply celebration event to recognise the success of our learners.

## 7. Attendance

- 7.1. The Attendance Advisory Service to Schools and Academies (AASSA) offers support to schools in ensuring children are safe and in receipt of education. AASSA is, in part, a statutory service and has developed to deliver our increased statutory responsibilities in relation to attendance, whilst continuing to offer a traded service to many of the schools in Medway.
- 7.2. We are working in partnership with Kent on a joint Attendance Alliance, focussing on performance, challenge and support. This alliance is supported by the DfE.
- 7.3. In the lagged published data for the academic year, 2022-2023, Medway has seen a 7.6% improvement in its persistent absence rate and has continued to narrow the gap with national from 8% in 2021-2022 to 5.1% in 2022-2023; this resulted in a 13-place rise in LA rankings.
- 7.4. In August 2024, the DfE introduced a statutory attendance tool for all schools to enable improved real time monitoring. All Medway schools report their data to this dashboard. I monitor this dashboard data through the Oversight Board. In December 2024 attendance had improved to 93.5% and was in-line with National.

## 8. Elective Home Education (EHE) and Children Missing Education (CME)

- 8.1. The numbers of our children and young people who are electively home educated has continued to rise. As of the 1 December 2024, 1019, pupils were electively home educated.
- 8.2. Whilst parents have the right to make an informed choice to provide their child's education at home, work continues to ensure that the provision of home education is appropriate in all cases, and that prior to removal, all other routes were open to and carefully considered by parents. Unfortunately, an increasing number of arrangements don't meet this threshold, with parents choosing to remove their children from education due to challenges in the education setting.
- 8.3. The increasing numbers of EHE has impacted on the capacity on the team to assess the quality of EHE provision and ensure that risk factors are identified, and appropriate actions taken in a timely manner. I have asked the service to review their capacity to do this work in light of the increased numbers and the changes in statutory duties proposed in the children's wellbeing and schools bill.
- 8.4. The team continue to work with school leaders to promote understanding of EHE responsibilities and processes. Fair Access Panel (FAP) protocols and reintegration criteria have been revised through coproduction with headteachers to assist timely reintegration of pupils back into school. We are also working with Mid Kent College; to extend our tuition offer for KS4 pupils who are EHE has been extended.
- 8.5. There is strengthened communication pathways and integrated working with officers across the education and SEND, and children's social care divisions, to ensure a multi-agency approach.

## 9. Early Years

- 9.1. We have a statutory duty to secure sufficient childcare provision, as far as reasonably practicable, for working parents, or parents who are studying or training for employment. The early years sufficiency team engage with all early year's providers across Medway, facilitating access to the government funded childcare offer and providing support for Medway children to achieve and be ready for school.
- 9.2. The Medway Family Information Service (FIS) acts as a brokerage service to Medway families who require early years provision for children from 9 months to four years of age, including children with special educational needs. The service also supports Medway families in many aspects of family life, such as childcare choices, parenting support, welfare assistance and is a free confidential service. The Family Information Service directory has a wealth of services for families to access and a telephone service for families and practitioners.

- 9.3. Currently there are 256 childcare providers registered with Medway Council. There are sufficient registered places to accept all currently eligible children. We have undertaken a review of sufficiency to accommodate the additional offer of 30 hours funded childcare for eligible working families from September 2025. The sufficiency assessment forecasts that with a take-up rate of 72% (in line with the national rate of take up) there will be sufficient childcare places to meet demand, however geographical challenges mean that not all families will receive their first choice of childcare provider. I am aware that some providers are experiencing challenges with recruitment and retention of staff due to their financial situations. We continue to work closely with the Department for Education to inform of sufficiency of childcare within Medway.
- 9.4. High quality early years provision has a significant impact on children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, because it provides access to appropriate resources and experiences. High quality settings can reduce the gaps in child development, through those most important formative years, and better prepare our children to be ready for school. All childcare providers must register with and be inspected by Ofsted, who give an overall grade for the quality of provision. Childcare provision in Medway continues to be of a high standard as shown in the table below.

Type of provision	Total number of providers inspected	% Achieving good or outstanding
Childminders	106	89%
Nursery classes in schools	41	100%
Private and voluntary nurseries	82	98%

## 10. Education Safeguarding

- 10.1. The Education Safeguarding Team (EST) is a part of the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service and is managed by the Safeguarding Service Manager. They provide high quality advice, support, challenge and training to education settings in Medway to enable them to develop the best possible policy, practice and safeguarding culture. The service identifies and responds to wider safeguarding concerns and highlights emerging themes in safeguarding.
- 10.2. We are committed to building strong, professional relationships with education settings and to developing partnership working across the authority, to improve safeguarding for Medway children
- 10.3. The EST deliver Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) training for Medway schools. This training is Continuing Professional Development accredited and allows schools to meet their statutory safeguarding training duty. It is the only DSL training that provides specific information on Medway policies, procedures and local safeguarding partners. Uptake has been strong, with over 75% of Medway schools sending at least one member of their team to a course. Extremely positive course evaluations demonstrate that participants

have their learning needs met and feel that their understanding of local practices and partners is developed.

- 10.4. Levels of Complaints About School (CAS) received from Ofsted continue to rise, with a 17% increase on the previous 12 months. When a complaint (is made to Ofsted, the regulator does not have the power to investigate those about the welfare of an individual child and passes the CAS to the us. The EST works with school leaders to explore concerns, seek assurance of safeguarding practice and where necessary offers support and guidance to assist in addressing and resolving the issues raised within complaints. The officer responds to the regulator, with a summary of findings and recommendations. There is a duty to report school-wide safeguarding issues. The EST is also sometimes asked to provide assurance to DfE and ESFA for CAS received regarding Academies and Independent schools. When a CAS contains a serious allegation one of His Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) may liaise directly with the EST prior to contacting the school.
- 10.5. Under Sections 175 and 157 of the Education Act 2004, the governing bodies of all schools have a duty to assure the Local Safeguarding Partnership of the quality of their safeguarding practice. This is done via an online self-audit. The EST analyse and report on the audit. This is the first year of using the online reporting tool. The audit is an efficient tool that supports continuous development of schools' safeguarding practice. Analysis of responses is currently in process. Findings will help identify key local priorities to improve safeguarding practice for children in Medway.
- 10.6. The EST has a well-developed programme of safeguarding reviews offered to LA maintained schools. LA schools due Ofsted, and all schools where there is a significant cause for concern (e.g. an Inadequate inspection outcome, or a number of complaints) are prioritised for a full and comprehensive in-school safeguarding review. In addition, we offer a range of shorter, focused "Safeguarding Snacks" to all Medway schools.
- 10.7. Termly online DSL information meetings are offered. The DSL meetings promote partnership working with the Local Authority and other local safeguarding partners and, the sharing of best practice between schools. National agencies, such as the NSPCC and City of London Police, have also delivered at these sessions. I have ensured that this has been extended to Early Years providers who are now invited to attend these meetings.
- 10.8. The EST deliver an annual Safeguarding Week with daily sessions on a range of topics, focussed on key local priorities. These training and information sharing events assure me that education teams are appropriately supported and high quality training in safeguarding matters is available to all those who require it.

- 10.9. The online Education Safeguarding Information Team, with a range of topical channels is another key resource for school safeguarding teams. It allows us to communicate effectively with them and to ensure that they can easily access local and national safeguarding resources. It is an efficient way to post key updates and urgent notifications. The channel has 499 members, with at least one representative from each Medway school.
- 10.10. Having identified that there was not an early years partner in the MASH, meaning that EY providers were not always consulted in the same way as schools on safeguarding matters, and following a successful trial, I ensured MASH Education Leads now send out and analyse information requests to early years settings.

## 11. Further Education

- 11.1. Through our work with the Careers Enterprise Company (CEC), Enterprise Advisers have been working with secondary schools to improve the quality and breadth of their career's strategies and programmes. Enterprise Advisers are senior leaders from the world of work.
- 11.2. 29 secondary school and higher educational institutions Medway are in the Kent & Medway Careers Hub including one college, SEND schools and alternative provisions. Some achievements this year have been: Network meetings and informal drop-in sessions for schools and the college to share good practice and resources; Careers staff completing their Compass Evaluations in Trusts which encourages working proactively together and the upskilling of new Careers Leaders. Careers staff forums and messaging groups.
- 11.3. There have been many training and development opportunities for enterprise co-ordinators and school/college staff to prepare for new CEC initiatives, for example, Future Skills Questionnaires; Careers Impact System; Peer to Peer Reviews and Teacher Encounters. All of which aim to improve careers provisions in schools/college.
- 11.4. Our Gatsby Benchmark scores are an average of 6 benchmarks achieved, higher than the national average of 5.8.
- 11.5. The Enterprise Coordinators are actively searching for current and relevant resources and regularly share the information with the schools and MidKent college through newsletters. The Enterprise Coordinators have become key conduits between careers providers and the schools and college.
- 11.6. Special schools and alternative provision have been provided with a free resource to support their careers programmes for a second year. Skills 360 events have supported pupils in these school with encounters with local employers.



- 11.7. I have agreed the purchasing of putting Medway schools' provision on the Kent Choices website to ensure all young people can clearly see all of the opportunities available to.
- 11.8. The Medway Business Pledgers list continues to grow year on year, these are pledges employers/employees can make to engage with education, upskill their workforce and support the community.
- 11.9. We have been working together closely on promoting their supported internship programmes in Medway and are supporting students by promoting T Levels placement opportunities to businesses.
- 11.10. We work closely with Medway's Further and Higher Education colleagues through the Medway Learning Partnership. The purpose of this meeting is to provide an opportunity for Council and Higher and Further Education senior officers to engage on a regular basis around issues that affect their organisations and strategically plan together.
- 11.11. The Learning Partnership has three strategic objectives:
- To work together to exploit opportunities and address challenges in priority areas identified by the community.
  - To drive forward and heighten the aspirations of all learners in Medway.
  - To encourage the engagement and retention of higher education learners within the community of Medway.

## 12. Quality of Education: Primary and Secondary Education

- 12.1. Our collective ambition is that all schools should be good or outstanding in order that life chances for all children and young people are improved. This ambition is being secured by working in partnership with education leaders, governors, trusts, the Regions Group (RG), the Department for Education (DfE) and Ofsted.
- 12.2. Both the Local Authority and the RG have mechanisms to intervene where there are concerns about school performance, including leadership and governance. Such intervention may include formal warning notices, removal of governing bodies and, in the case of academies, re-brokerage to another Multi Academy Trust (MAT). Our relationship with the RG is well established and is maintained through regular formal and informal communications to share intelligence and discuss a wide range of issues including the performance of all schools within Medway. I attend regular meetings with RG colleagues, where officers raise concerns and challenge when appropriate regarding Academy performance.

- 12.3. The education system leadership shares a collective responsibility for the quality of education for all children and young people in Medway. Partners work together through:
- Medway Education Partnership Group
  - Education leadership associations (CEO group, MELA, MSHA and SSALE)
  - The four primary zone network meetings
  - SEND Partnership Board
  - Medway Governor Association, although this is currently paused
  - Medway Children's Safeguarding Partnership
  - Child Friendly Medway
  - Thames Gateway Teaching School Hub Partnership Board
  - Medway and Swale HCP Children's Core 20 Plus 5 Board
  - Medway Health and Well Being Board.
- 12.4. The Medway Education Partnership Group (MEPG) Partnership's priorities are:
- All children and young people in Medway access high-quality, inclusive education provision and are appropriately supported to achieve their potential.
  - Services provided to children and young people in Medway, to support their education and development, are provided in a timely way; demonstrate value for money; operate within robust and efficient processes; and are informed by the voice of children, young people and their families.
  - All children and young people are educated and supported within the local provision(s) most appropriate for their needs.
  - Children and young people in Medway are healthy and resilient and supported throughout their education and development to continue to lead healthy and positive lives into adulthood.
- 12.5. Prior to September 2024, the positive trend of Medway's schools sustaining a good or better Ofsted judgement was evident. Although the lead over national reduced, both primary and secondary phases outperformed the national Ofsted profile. Early Years settings achieving good and outstanding Ofsted judgements remained consistently high.
- 12.6. From September 2024, Ofsted ceased allocating an overall effectiveness grade in inspections of state-funded schools. Individual grades are now allocated against five areas: Quality of education, Behaviour & attitudes, Personal development, Leadership & management and Early Years provision or Sixth Form provision. Schools now either receive a short or full Ofsted inspection. Allocated grades against each of the five areas are only made during a full inspection.

12.7. We are working closely with the local authority maintained schools who have been judged as requiring improvement and where necessary are brokering additional support from the local education system. Where Academies are in this category, we offer support and discuss with the RG.

### 13. School performance – Academic Outcomes

13.1. Full analysis of our academic performance was shared in January in the annual school's report. Whilst I am pleased that some progress has been made in the majority of outcomes, I continue to push to raise aspirations and challenge under performance. Our outcomes are still below national averages for most indicators and are particularly poor for disadvantaged children, care experienced children, and children with SEND.

13.2. I have asked officers to work with the education system leadership to develop a programme of symposiums and solution focused action learning sets to have a focus on these issues. Particularly, but not exclusively:

- Continued focus on literacy and numeracy
- Inclusion in our schools
- Outcomes at key stage 4 and 5 where the gap to national is the greatest
- Disadvantaged outcomes
- Outcomes for children with SEND
- Transition planning

13.3. Below is a brief summary of academic performance for 23/24:

#### 13.4. **Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)**

- Fewer pupils in Medway achieved a good level of development in the EYFS in 2023/24 compared to 2022/23. Pupils with SEN support in the EYFS achieved below children with SEN support nationally.
- Children with an EHCP continue to perform less well than their peers nationally but the gap with national reduced in 2023/24

#### 13.5. **Phonics**

- Outcomes have improved in Y1 and Y2 compared to the outcomes achieved in 2022/23. However, these remain lower than pre pandemic levels and below national.
- Children with SEN support in year 2 matched national in 2022/23, other SEN groups were below national. In 2023/24, year 1 and year 2 children with SEN support or an Education Health Care Plan performed less well than national.

### 13.6. Key stage 2

- Medway's average combined reading, writing and maths (RWM) score has improved compared to last year and now matches national.
- Children with SEN support and ECHPs improved on last year, as did national, therefore performance remains below national.
- The percentage of children achieving the expected standard in Reading and in maths has improved compared to 2023/24. We are still behind national however the gaps have narrowed.
- In reading, children with an EHCP improved on the previous year and the gap compared to last year narrowed. In maths, children with an EHCP in Medway improved at the same rate as national.
- The percentage of children reaching the expected standard in writing has remained static and in line with national. Children with SEN support performed better than last year and higher than national. Children with an EHCP in remained static with national out-performing Medway.

### 13.7. Key stage 4

- The 2023/24 attainment 8 score improved compared to the previous year, whilst national saw a slight fall. However, performance remains below national. Performance of both young people with SEN support and with EHCP's is lower than the previous year, and below national.
- Young people achieving grade 5+ in English and maths increased both in Medway and nationally compared to the previous year. However, the gap has reduced to 1 percentage point (pp). The percentage of young people with SEN support achieving 5+ in English and maths is fewer than in 2023/24. For those with an EHCP, performance increased by 1.7pp and the gap with national narrowed.
- The percentage of young people achieving 4+ in English and maths improved by 2pp. However, national continues to outperform Medway. For those with SEN support, performance is lower than 22/23 and the gap to national has widened. For those with an EHCP performance improved on the previous year.
- The average progress 8 score is -0.07 and is an improvement of 0.04pp on 2022/23. Medway remains below the national average progress 8 score -0.03. SEN support and ECHP matched or were in line with national and show an improvement.

### 13.8. Key Stage 5

- General entry and technical level entry and the proportion of pupils achieving grades AAB in 2 facilitating subjects, has not been published by the DfE and is expected later this month.
- The Average Point Score (APS) per A level entry and academic entry is broadly in line with last year's figures and reflects the rate of improvement at national. In both measures Medway remains below the national average.
- The Average Point Score (APS) per A level entry and academic entry for young people with SEN support and EHCP significantly increased compared to last year. Whilst performance continues to be below national, the gap is reducing.

### 14. Mainstream School Sufficiency

- 14.1. We have a statutory duty to ensure sufficient good quality school places are available to meet demand from the resident population. The School Place Planning Strategy 2022-27 sets out the framework upon which appropriate decisions are made. An annual review of the strategy is presented to Cabinet each year highlighting emerging need and offering proposals to meet demand based upon the latest pupil forecasts.
- 14.2. The strategy has been successful in ensuring sufficient places are available and the councils forecasts are recognised as being accurate to within the 1% margin of error indicated by the DfE.
- 14.3. Pressure on places continues with significant inward migration the main driver. To meet this demand a number of expansions to schools are underway and planned to cater for longer term demand, along with various bulge classes created to meet immediate need.
- 14.4. Recently urgent bulge classes have been created in the primary sector in Gillingham to meet demand from the NHS recruitment drive and in Hoo where inward migration due to new housing schemes has created pressure on school places.
- 14.5. As part of the annual reviews of the School Place Planning Strategy planned bulge classes and expansions are identified in a table which covers the secondary sector for the next seven years. These have been planned and agreed with schools and will help to ensure that sufficient places are available.
- 14.6. Forecasting is undertaken twice each year to ensure that we remain best placed to react to surges in demand covering mainstream and specialist sectors.

14.7. Officers are working with planning colleagues to ensure a joined-up approach to providing the school places required to meet demand from the new local plan and other areas with large potential housing developments.

## 15. Mainstream School Transport

15.1. Numbers of mainstream pupils eligible for travel assistance continues to rise and has reached in excess of 2300 pupils with the previous high being last year with 1800 pupils. It is expected that numbers will continue to increase as demand increases.

15.2. The majority of these pupils will receive a bus or rail pass to enable them to independently travel to and from school with a small number granted a taxi. There are more than 50 families in receipt of fuel allowance which assists parents or carers to drive their children to and from school.

15.3. Maritime Academy opened its permanent site in Strood in September 2024 as planned, moving from the temporary location at Twydall Primary School.

## 16. Early Career Teachers (ECT)

16.1. All ECTs must be registered with an Appropriate Body. TSH (Teaching School Hubs) and ISTIP (Independent Schools Teacher Induction Panel) can act as Appropriate Bodies. The ability to be the registered body was removed from LAs in September 2022, and therefore LAs no longer have responsibility for ECT induction.

16.2. Medway has an SLA with Thames Gateway TSH for this academic year to support the TSH with its monitoring of ECT reports (submitted 3 times a year) and quality assurance visits to 5 Medway schools who are using Thames Gateway TSH for their Appropriate Body.

17. Post 16 participation (including children not in education, employment and training)

17.1. The Academic year 2023/24 saw a marked improvement NEET (Not in Education Employment or Training) and Unknown (where no destination for the young person has been identified).

17.2. Our 2024 DFE annual performance scorecard records NEETs and Not knowns at 2.9% of 16 and 17 years olds, placing Medway in the 1<sup>st</sup> quintile compared to other authorities.

17.3. The Information and Guidance Team (IAG) continue to assess the pathways required to support ongoing participation and collaboratively work with schools and local providers to seek out opportunities for our young people. I have concerns regarding availability of appropriate provision for academic year 2024/25, where we have seen an increased demand for level 1 and 2 post 16 courses, with limited availability. We are working with the post 16 partnership group and have raised these issues through our network forums.

17.4. The services have been collaborating with Adult Education to support interim provision, along with increased discussions with local alternative provision providers.

## 18. School Organisation and Capital Projects

18.1. The schools capital programme team ensures that the proposals, through the School Place Planning Strategy, to create additional capacity within the school system are delivered to budget and on time.

18.2. Since 2018 and until 2025 when the current educational capital programme is expected to complete, the council will have delivered over 6000 additional primary, secondary and specialist places.

18.3. Funding for the projects comes from various streams including central government grants and section 106 contributions.

18.4. New Free Schools, through the governments Free School Programme, are delivered by the DfE directly and of the 2 planned we continue to experience significant delays. I meet regularly with officers and the regions group to challenge the progress of these.

18.5. The team manage the local authority maintained schools' condition and maintenance programme, and we ensure that the schools under the LA's control are fit for purpose, and provide safe and warm environments for our young people to learn and thrive in.

## 19. School Services (including Admissions and Medway Test)

19.1. The Medway Test is an immense logistical challenge, which the team delivers successfully. The number of children who sat the test in September 2024 was the highest on record with 4454 pupils registering for the test.

19.2. 44% of Medway children who sat the test achieved a pass compared to 77% of out of area children. Pleasingly, more children with FSM and SEND sat the test than in previous years and we expect this number to continue to rise in the coming years as we have sought to make the test procedure more inclusive and accessible, whilst maintaining the academic integrity.

19.3. Our Medway test team are implementing updates to information published about the test which will set clearer expectations for children, parents/carers and schools, to avoid some the confusion experienced last year.

19.4. Over 99% of all school admission applications are now completed online, and all statutory timelines are met.

19.5. Despite secondary transfer cohort sizes increasing each year, the Admissions Team sustain a good rate of children being offered a preference on national offer day. For September 2024 entry, 80% of Year 6 children were offered

their first preference and 96% were offered one of their preferences. Outcomes are expected to be similar for September 2025 entry.

19.6. For September 2024 entry, 95% of incoming Year R pupils were offered their first preference and 99% were offered one of their preferences.

## 20. Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), Including SEND Transport

20.1. As co-chair of the SEND Partnership Board, through the Oversight meetings and through regular meetings with the Assistant Director: Education and SEND, I am kept abreast of the delivery of the joint local Area Improvement Plan and the Safety Valve Implementation plan.

20.2. We are making good progress to achieving the outcomes in our local Area Improvement Plan. Activity on the improvement journey in the last 12 months has included:

- Recruitment of the local offer officer and an update of the local offer.
- Doubled the amount of Short Breaks provision available at Rivermead Outreach Community Challenge from Summer 2024.
- Medway Parent Carer Forum communication directly to families through social media pages (reach 4900 people, averaging 1963 followers, 3100 engaged followers), face to face meetings, online webinars and discussions.
- Established a disability register with over 100 families signed up so far.
- SEND and Inclusion teams located in family hubs.
- Partnerships for inclusion of neurodiversity in 21 schools (PINS) pilot
- Termly recorded Headteacher briefings with relevant updates.
- Inclusion conference for education partners. 160 attendees across schools, providers and voluntary sectors.
- Digital family hubs app is now live, and app usage is supporting family's navigation to services. 5653 families to date have downloaded and are using the app since April 2024.
- Implementation of Medway Community Healthcare parent information session, followed by a Question and Answer session tailored to the parents' individual needs.
- Core Standards interactive strategies and information on website along with sensory and Occupational Therapy information, including diet, sleep and behaviour strategies.



- Educational Psychologist recruitment and statutory assessment prioritisation, EHC needs assessment requests received since 15<sup>th</sup> July 2024 are being processed within the 20 week statutory timeframe.
  - Commissioned support to embed the voice of the child across the partnership
  - North East London NHS Foundation Trust and Kent and medway Social Care Partnership Trust have a joint CYP and Adult Mental Health transition lead in post to support overall transition pathway.
  - Key posts recruited to – Designated Social Care Officer and Head of Quality and Inclusion
  - New college SEND places started in September, already oversubscribed.
  - Over £600,000 of graduated support funding and whole school support funding given to schools to develop inclusive provision.
- 20.3. We continue to work closely with our partners to ensure that the local offer for children and young people with SEND can have their needs met locally.
- 20.4. Furthermore, I receive regular updates on our Safety Valve (SV) intervention programme. The programme of improvement, due to complete in 2026, is delivering services within an in-year positive balance, including.
- 20.5. Appropriately managing the demand for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). The proportion of children and young people with EHCPs in Medway is now in line with national.
- 20.6. Ensuring the use of appropriate and cost-effective provision and sufficiency of provision through our commissioning teams and SEND capital programme. Changes in the way we are handling EHCna. The addition of 2 assessment teams. Ongoing recruitment of locum and agency EP's (39 contracted for EHCna) introduction of graduated support funding and whole school support funding which education providers can apply for to develop their inclusivity.
- 20.7. Whilst we are showing an in-year surplus, the amount is £2.5m short of where we need to be for our plan, the main reason for this is the fall in the proportion of children and young people with SEND receiving their education in mainstream schools. Only 26.4% of children with EHCPs attend their local mainstream school compared to 43.3% nationally, and, as a consequence, 46.6% are in special schools, compared to 32.3% nationally. This increased pressure on specialist provision increases the demand for independent provision.
- 20.8. I am driving forward with the team on focused conversations with those schools and trust where there are low numbers of children with SEND and will address this in our conversation with the regional director later this month.

## 21. SEND transport

- 21.1. The number of children in receipt of SEND travel assistance continues to rise and has reached in excess of 1900 pupils being transported to more than 115 provisions. This is exacerbated by the high proportion of children not attending their local mainstream school.
- 21.2. The majority of these children will travel in shared transport vehicles, with a small number granted solo transport. We have increased the number of pupils who receive a bus or rail pass and are working to support independent travel, where necessary also providing an adult pass. There are some families in receipt of personal travel budgets or fuel allowance which allows parents or carers to make their own travel arrangements or drive their children to and from school.
- 21.3. The Council must meet its statutory obligations to provide services appropriately, but in doing so it must ensure that it delivers 'best value' for its residents.

## 22. Conclusion

- 22.1. I am proud of the achievements of the partnership and will continue to work with our education providers, wider stakeholders and excellent staff to ensure all children and young people in Medway receive the highest quality of education.

## Lead officer contact

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## Appendices

None

## Background papers

None