

Children's Services

ANNUAL FOSTERING REPORT 2024-2025

MEDWAY FOSTERING SERVICE

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1. INTRODUCTION AND LEGAL CONTEXT

This report provides a comprehensive overview of the business operations and performance of the Medway Fostering Service during the 2024–2025 financial year. It includes key data on service delivery, performance metrics, and updates on the activities and progress of the Fostering Panel.

In addition, the report highlights significant service developments over the past year and outlines planned initiatives for the 2025–2026 period.

Medway Fostering Service is registered with and regulated by Ofsted. All service activities are conducted in accordance with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and 2013, the National Minimum Standards for Fostering (2011), the Children Act 1989 and associated statutory guidance (Volume 4).

The report also sets out the service's aims and objectives for the upcoming financial year and evaluates performance at the end of the reporting period.

2. FOSTERING SERVICE

Our Commitment to Children and Young People

At Medway Fostering Service, children and young people are at the centre of everything we do. We operate as a responsive, reflective, and learning-focused service, taking full responsibility for addressing concerns and complaints raised by children, carers, staff, and stakeholders. This commitment underpins our drive for continuous improvement in both outcomes and the quality of care we provide.

Our primary goal is to ensure that every child and young person lives in a safe, nurturing, and loving home; one where they feel accepted and are supported in their personal growth and development.

We strive to offer high-quality foster and supported homes that meet the diverse needs of children. These homes are aligned with each child's permanency plan and promote their physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development through access to healthcare, education, and leisure opportunities. We are committed to equality of opportunity, ensuring that each child's racial, religious, linguistic, cultural, and gender identity is respected and supported.

The fostering service adheres to statutory regulations and best practice standards. Foster carers and hosts receive regular supervision and are valued as key partners in delivering care. We continuously monitor service performance and encourage innovation through regular consultation with children in care and foster carers.

Structure of the Fostering Service

Through the second half of 2024/25 the fostering service underwent a process of restructure

in order to meet the current and projected demands on the service. The Fostering service continues to sit under Provider Services, which has one Head of Service and one Service Manager. Under the Service Manager, there are four Team Managers and one Fostering Panel Coordinator.

This restructure has changed the existing team names, to align to progressive, current and legislative terminologies. The restructure changed the team names to better reflect their function, added an Assistant Team Manager to each of the four teams and increased capacity in both the Fostering Recruitment and Assessment Team and the Kinship and Post Order Support Team. Due to natural attrition within the service and careful planning, the restructure avoided the need for any staff redeployment, redundancy and was achieved within the established budget envelope.

The Medway Fostering Service is comprised of four dedicated teams:

- Fostering Recruitment and Assessment Team
- 2x Fostering Support and Development Teams
- Kinship and Post-Order Support Team

The service is overseen by the Fostering Service Manager.

Fostering Recruitment and Assessment Team

Led by a Team Manager, this team includes one Senior Practitioner and four Social Workers, all in permanent roles. We have recently offered a post for a Marketing and Recruitment Officer to enhance our foster carer recruitment and retention strategy, and their compliance is underway. An Assistant Team Manager is also being onboarded to strengthen leadership capacity. This team also has responsibility for the assessment and oversight of Private Fostering arrangements as well as Supported Homes Hosts.

Fostering Support and Development Teams

These two teams are managed by two permanent Team Managers and comprise of 14 staff members, including 12 qualified Social Workers and two Family Workers. Each team has an Assistant Team Manager role as of 1 April 2025.

Kinship Team

The team is composed of one Team Manager, one Assistant Team Manager, two senior practitioners and 6 Kinship and Post Order support social workers. The addition of two more Kinship Social Workers will meet the service's high demands of the team's mix and varied workload, which includes, viability assessments, temporary reg 24 and reg 25 approvals, connected carers approvals, special guardianship approvals and post order support cases.

There has been a high staff turnover within the service with 16 new starters (47.05% of staff) during 24/25 due to a mixture of reasons such as career progression in and outside of Medway, change in career or area of social work practice. Regardless of the movement of staff, the service has seen improvements in practice, such as frequency of visiting to foster carers, supervision by managers, statutory compliance. Further, in Quarter 1 of 25/26 we have seen further recruitment to strengthen the management support within the service by recruiting 4 Assistant Team Managers.

Key Roles Supporting Quality and Oversight

Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer

The Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer plays a vital role in safeguarding the welfare of children and young people. They assess the ongoing suitability of foster carers and their households, review terms of approval, attend panel meetings, and contribute to investigations involving allegations or concerns about standards of care. Their independent oversight ensures that the child's best interests remain the priority.

Allegations/ Quality of Care/ Complaints:

All allegations and quality of care concerns are fully explored and analysed to ensure all children are safeguarded and concerns are addressed. In total during the year, 18 carers were reported to the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) out of which 6 were no further action, 4 were advice and guidance and 0 unfounded for consultation compared to 14 the previous financial year. When required the Fostering Service works in partnership with the operational social work teams and the Police to investigate concerns and take action to safeguard the welfare of children.

There has been a conscious effort to improve the dialogue and working relationship with the Local Authority Designated Officer in the year 2024-2025. The Fostering Team Managers and the Service Manager meet with the Local Authority Designated Officer monthly and the Head of Provider Services meets quarterly. This closer working relationship has led to improvements in how we learn as a service by undertaking appreciative enquiries as a joint learning opportunity with our social work colleagues.

Agency Decision Maker

The Agency Decision Maker role has been shared between four senior social workers: the Head of Provider Services, the Head of Improvement and two independent professionals working on a rota basis. They review recommendations from the Fostering Panel and make decisions on the approval of new foster carers, as well as the continued suitability of existing carers. In response to increased panel activity, a permanent part-time agency decision maker has recently been appointed to reduce reliance on locum support.

The Head of Provider Services also currently acts as the Agency Decision Maker in relation to the approval of Regulation 24 temporarily approved foster carers, and where there are variations and exemptions to carers approval as well as approval of Private Fostering Arrangements, Supported Homes Arrangements, Homes for Ukraine scheme and Special Guardianship Support plans.

3. SERVICE ACTIVITY 2024/2025

Fostering Placement Sufficiency and Modernisation

Medway recognises the urgent need to increase placement sufficiency for children in care. In response, we have launched an ambitious Fostering Modernisation Plan aimed at attracting, recruiting, and retaining high-quality foster carers to support Medway's children and young people.

This annual report outlines the progress and key activities of the Medway Fostering Service throughout the year, highlighting our ongoing efforts to strengthen and improve the service.

The Recruitment and Assessment Team plays a central role in this work, managing all aspects of the recruitment, training, and assessment of prospective foster carers and Supported Homes Providers. The team also oversees Private Fostering arrangements and supports unaccompanied young people placed under the Homes for Ukraine scheme within Medway.

Key Objectives for 2024–2025

During the 2024–2025 period, Medway Fostering Service focused on the following strategic goals:

- **Increase the number of in-house foster carers**, reducing reliance on independent fostering agencies.
- **Enhance recruitment from diverse backgrounds**, ensuring our carers reflect the communities we serve.
- **Strengthen the support offer for foster carers**, making it competitive and appealing to prospective carers.
- **Expand specialist fostering provision**, including placements for sibling groups and Parent and Child arrangements.
- **Join the Local Authority Fostering South East (LAFSE) Hub**, fostering regional collaboration and shared learning.
- **Launch Medway's first Mockingbird Constellation**, supported by Local Authority Fostering South East and Department for Education (DfE) funding, to provide a community-based model of foster care that enhances stability and support.

- **Submission for Ofsted Registration of Supported Homes hosts**, we have submitted to register the Supported Homes hosts with Ofsted in October 2024, and this is still being processed by Ofsted.

Advertising and Recruitment Activity

The national demand for foster carers remains exceptionally high, and recruitment continues to be highly competitive across the country. Medway Council faces similar challenges, with a saturated fostering market that includes numerous Independent Fostering Agencies and neighbouring Local Authorities actively recruiting within the region. This competitive landscape significantly reduces the pool of prospective foster carers.

Between April 2024 and May 2025, Medway's recruitment efforts were impacted by the departure of the appointed Marketing and Recruitment Officer. As a result, the service relied more heavily on promotional support from the Local Authority Fostering Southeast Hub. Despite this, Medway Fostering maintained a consistent presence through social media and continued to run targeted campaigns using a mix of public relations, digital advertising, and community engagement.

We actively participated in local events at shopping centres, parks, festivals, and community gatherings to raise awareness about the urgent need for more foster carers. Our digital strategy remained a key focus, ensuring that campaign messages were reinforced throughout the year. Pay-per-click (PPC) advertising was used to capture the attention of individuals actively searching for fostering opportunities in the area. Research consistently shows that more than 40% of users click on one of the top three paid search results, making this a valuable tool for lead generation.

Medway Fostering's social media presence continues to grow. Our Facebook page has nearly 1,710 followers, with an average of two posts per week.

Facebook – Financial Year 2024/25

Metric	Value	Change
Reach	137,321	↑ 42.7%
Link Clicks	3,112	↑ 1.7%
Follows	65	–

On Instagram, we have 96 followers. Expanding our audience increases visibility and engagement, more followers mean more people are likely to see our content and visit the

website to request further information or a home visit. For example, with 1,000 followers, approximately 50 people may see a post, compared to just 5 with 100 followers.

Our year-long campaign specifically targeted Facebook users in Medway and surrounding areas who are likely to be interested in fostering. The primary objective was to encourage users to like, follow, and share our page to broaden our reach (Appendix 1).



The Medway Fostering website remains the primary source of enquiries. In February 2024, the enquiry form was integrated into a new portal, streamlining the process and reducing response times.



Celebrating Foster Carers

In 2024–2025, Medway hosted two major events to celebrate and recognise the contributions of our foster carers. During Foster Care Fortnight in May 2024, we joined the national campaign led by The Fostering Network and hosted a special event for our carers. At this event, we launched our “Power of Relationships”

campaign, which highlighted the importance of strong, supportive connections in fostering. Materials gathered during this celebration were later used to enhance our ongoing recruitment campaigns. A range of events were held, including our afternoon tea with foster carers, which saw an increase in carer participation from 14 households in 2024 to 42 households in 2025.

Our final event of the year was to celebrate foster carers in December 2024 where we acknowledged their long years of service for Medway council. We celebrated carers who have been offering a home to our children and have been registered carers from 0 – 44 years.

Recruitment Activity Update

Recruiting foster carers remains a significant challenge both locally and nationally. Recent Ofsted data highlights this ongoing issue: in 2024, there were 42,615 fostering households in England, down from 45,370 in 2021. While 4,055 new households were approved, 4,820 ceased fostering, resulting in a net loss of 765 households. The primary reasons for carers leaving include insufficient financial support, lack of service support, and a perceived lack of respect for their role.

Since 2022, Independent Fostering Agency households have also declined. Over the past year, mainstream Local Authority households decreased by 5%, and independent Fostering Agency households by 2%. The Fostering Network estimates that an additional 6,500 fostering families are needed in England to meet current demand.

As of March 2024, family and friends (kinship) households made up 21% of all fostering households, up from 16% in 2020 and accounted for 50% of all new approvals. Of the 38,565 households approved between April 2023 and March 2024, 12% (4,820) deregistered. On average, Local Authority carers who left had been fostering for nearly 8 years, while Independent Fostering Agency carers averaged 5.5 years.



Medway's Fostering Service continues to play a vital role in supporting children and young people in care. The service requires a diverse pool of skilled and resilient carers to provide stability and a positive family experience. However, the gap between the number of children entering care and the number of new foster carer approvals continues to widen.



Despite these challenges, Medway fostering community has shown remarkable commitment, stepping up during difficult times to support recruitment efforts. This reflects the enduring value and meaning of fostering in our community.

Local Recruitment and Retention Efforts

Between April 2024 and March 2025, Medway received 366 initial enquiries, resulting in 59 registrations of interest. While many enquiries did not progress due to eligibility criteria (e.g.,

lack of a spare bedroom or having a child under one), we remain hopeful that some of these individuals will return when their personal circumstances change.

Key figures for the period include:

Table 1: Registration of Interest and Initial Home Visit activity.

Activity	Count
ROIs Completed	52
IHVs Booked	45
IHVs Completed	30

As of March 2025, 21 prospective households were in Stage 2 assessment, and from April 2025 to date, five additional carers have been approved.

Our online presence continues to grow, with strong engagement and positive feedback. Although enquiry numbers have stabilised following a spike in 2023, the conversion rate remains a challenge. Nonetheless, the Recruitment and Assessment team, supported by the Support and Development and Kinship and Post Order Support teams, has worked tirelessly to maintain momentum.

Supported Homes

The team also oversees the recruitment of Supported Homes Providers, offering young people aged 16–25 a safe, supportive environment to develop independent living skills. Between April 2024 and March 2025, we received 17 enquiries, resulting in 3 approvals. 0 applicants withdrew to join an Independent Fostering Agency, and 0 transferred to in-house fostering. As of March 2025, 6 providers are in assessment, with 2 approvals expected by July 2025.

Supported Homes Enquiries and Applications (April 2024 – March 2025)

Category	Number
Enquiries received	17
Applicants approved	3
Applicants withdrew to join IFA	0
Applicants transferred to in-house fostering	0

Supported Homes Current Year Data (Since 1st April 2025)

Category	Number
Total approved providers	12
Enquiries received (since 1st April 2025)	9

Providers currently in assessment	6
Expected approvals by July 2025	2

Community Engagement

Medway competes with other Local Authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies, but our strength lies in local connections. Medway carers provide local homes for local children. We have built strong partnerships with schools to raise awareness of fostering, private fostering, and supported homes. Our website is regularly updated, and we continue to use carer videos to connect with potential applicants.

The Recruitment team has also been active in the community, attending events such as the Chatham Carnival, Medway Pride, Walk for Peace, Chatham Mosque, and Medway Interfaith Association Forums - demonstrating our commitment to inclusivity and outreach.

Fostering Panel

Since April 2024, the Fostering Panel has convened on 21 occasions, during which a total of 95 cases have been presented. In recent months, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of permanent matches brought to panel. To support this, the Panel Adviser and Panel Administrator have been working closely with the Permanency Lead to ensure timely matching of children. To meet this growing demand, dedicated permanent matching panels are now scheduled on a bi-monthly basis. Efforts are also underway to improve the timeliness of paperwork submissions, which has previously been a challenge.

Panel continues to encourage that children and young people are given the opportunity to either attend panel or share their views through creative means such as videos or voice notes. This year, panel members have been delighted to receive some thoughtful and imaginative contributions from children.

Over the past year, two Form F approvals were deferred by the Agency Decision Makers. One remains deferred pending additional checks, while the other was subsequently approved following further information from the assessing social worker.

Routine matters such as carer retirements and resignations are typically addressed under Any Other Business. However, where a resignation follows a concern or investigation, the case is formally presented



to panel by the supervising social worker. Carers are invited to share their views in person or in writing, depending on their preference.

The Central List currently includes:

- 1 Panel Chair
- 2 Vice Chairs
- 13 Independent Members (including foster carers, looked-after children's nurses, and a care-experienced adult)
- 3 Elected Members (with a fourth member currently completing induction)

All panel members have up-to-date Disclosure and Barring Service checks and are fully compliant. Social work-qualified members are registered with Social Work England, with annual checks carried out by the Panel Adviser. Panel member appraisals are conducted annually between January and December.

In addition to the Central List, the panel is supported by a Panel Adviser, Panel Administrator, and two Independent Agency Decision Makers.

Quarterly Panel Practice Development meetings are held with the Panel Chair, Vice Chairs, Agency Decision Maker, Service Managers, and the Head of Service. These meetings provide a valuable forum for sharing good practice, identifying emerging themes, and exploring ways to enhance panel effectiveness.

Over the past 12 months, panel members have participated in two joint training sessions with the fostering service. These sessions focused on lessons learned from cases involving the Local Authority Designated Officer and were co-facilitated by the fostering service and Local Authority Designate Officer.

New staff within the fostering service have also had the opportunity to observe panel meetings as part of their induction, helping to build understanding and consistency across the service.

Panel Feedback

Panel members have consistently reported that the quality of paperwork and presentations brought to panel is generally good to excellent. In instances where paperwork falls below expected standards, constructive feedback is shared with the assessing or supervising social worker and their team manager following the panel meeting. Members have also noted strong working relationships between assessing social workers and feel that prospective carers are well-prepared for their panel appearance.

Over the past year, some panel members have experienced challenges with IT systems and accessing documents via Microsoft Teams. While these issues can be frustrating, members have praised the Panel Administrator for their prompt and effective support in resolving

problems. Given the importance of secure document sharing, panel members have suggested the possibility of being issued Medway email accounts to streamline access.

A review of panel agenda timings was undertaken after it was noted that extended case discussions were causing delays, leading to prospective and approved carers waiting longer than necessary. To address this, scheduled discussion times have now been built into the agenda before each case begins, which has helped reduce anxiety and improve the overall flow of meetings.

When additional information is requested by panel members or the Agency Decision Maker, it is typically provided in a timely manner to avoid delays in the approval process.

However, delays in receiving information from external agencies, particularly DBS checks and medical reports, continue to impact the timeliness of assessments being brought to panel. In some cases, this has resulted in placements becoming unregulated.

As part of the annual appraisal process, panel members are asked to reflect on the general functioning of the panel, including processes, paperwork availability, use of Teams, and overall conduct. Some of their comments include:

- *"No, I feel the panel processes run smoothly and the availability of paperwork is ready in a timely manner."*
- *"I have had issues accessing or updating some paperwork on occasion, but these are generally resolved quickly by admin, allowing me to complete my tasks effectively. The current panel processes work well."*
- *"Panel members are respectful of one another and professional in their approach."*
- *"No concerns—I've really enjoyed being part of the panel and find the process smooth and clear."*

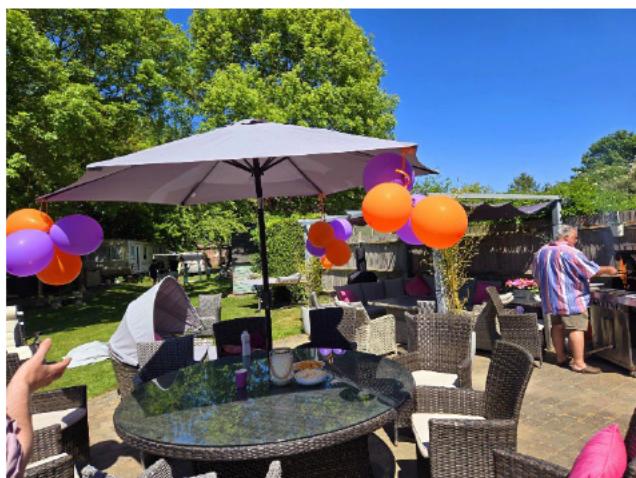
Recent Panel Development and Progress

The panel advisor role continues to be dynamic to make the best use of panel time and meet the functional requirements of panel. The Panel Advisor continues to have oversight of Annual Review Tracker. From this, panel agendas are set in advance, ensuring priority is given to matters such as Assessments and Standards of Care. As mentioned above, the work with the permanence lead within Corporate Parenting is seeing an increase in the children being matched permanently. Panel had to increase its activity to ensure children without permanency plans were prioritised.

All Annual Reviews are returning to panel at first review, subsequent Annual Reviews are returning to panel 3 yearly or sooner if required i.e. following a significant change.

Advice to Agency and Agency Decision Maker decision is being shared with Social Worker/Team Manager on the first working day following Agency Decision Maker and any recommendations/actions tracked and update feedback to panel.

Supervising Social Workers and Children's Social Workers are more frequently submitting children's voices for permanent matches through voice notes and video messages.



With the increase in children being presented to panel, there have been a number of occasions where paperwork has not been received on time. This has been more notable where children are placed with Independent Fostering Agencies.

Medway had two independent Agency Decision Makers to provide Decisions and Advice to Agency. As noted above, we have

appointed a permanent Agency Decision Maker on a part time basis, which will support the current increased demand within 2025-2026 financial year.



Mockingbird Constellation Update – Medway

Medway launched its first Mockingbird constellation on 19 October 2024. This pilot constellation includes 1 Hub Home Carer household, 7 Satellite families, and 10 children and young people, aged between 7 and 17. The group represents a wide range of fostering experience—from carers in their second year to those with over 20 years of service.

The children and young people in the constellation include sibling groups and those with physical, social, and emotional needs. Medway receives coaching and support from The Fostering Network to ensure fidelity to the Mockingbird model. Quarterly Fidelity Review reports are submitted, with the most recent in February 2025, and monthly data is provided by the Liaison Worker and Hub Home Carer.

Being part of a constellation offers carers and young people the chance to build meaningful relationships through monthly social events and coffee mornings. Activities are chosen collaboratively to ensure they are inclusive and accessible. Additional outings, such as cinema trips during school holidays, have also taken place.

The constellation stays connected through a WhatsApp group and shared calendar, fostering regular communication and mutual support. Each child is entitled to up to three sleepovers per month at the Hub Home, which have been well received. The Hub Home Carers also provide day care, attend meetings, and offer emotional support to satellite carers.

Importantly, all satellite carers are expected to actively contribute to the constellation. This was clearly demonstrated recently when the Hub Home Carers experienced a bereavement

- satellite carers stepped in to support both the Hub and each other, organising events and transporting children.

In late 2024, the project lead initiated collaboration with Medway Youth Service. A Youth Service Team Leader attended a coffee morning to explore opportunities, resulting in:

- Tickets to Ninja Warrior (March)
- A cinema takeover (April)
- A bike project
- Exclusive access to youth centres for weekend socials
- A designated youth worker assigned to the constellation

While still in early stages, this partnership is generating exciting ideas for future activities.

Medway has already been approached by other local authorities for guidance on how to embrace and launch the Mockingbird model. The second constellation has since launched in May 2025 with a third in the pipeline for October 2025.

Registered Foster Carers

As of 31st March 2025, there were 78 generic foster carer household, 16 connected carer and

4 temporary approved carer households. We are operating in a competitive climate where the national picture is challenging. The fruit of our recruitment activity is beginning to show, and we anticipate that 25/26 will show further improvement in recruitment.

We are currently looking after 143 children, an increase from 138 children in placement with Medway foster carers on 31 January 2024.



<u>Year</u>	<u>Newly approved generic fostering households</u>	<u>Newly approved kinship care households (inc. temp approvals)</u>
<u>2020-21</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>25</u>
<u>2021-22</u>	<u>15</u>	<u>35</u>
<u>2022-23</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>25</u>
<u>2023-24</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>22</u>
<u>2024-25</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>19</u>

The table illustrates the new foster carer and connected carer approvals from 2020 relating to the count of registered foster carer households, the total number of foster placements, and the instances of deregistration.

During 1 April 2024 – 31 March 2025 there was a total of 38 fostering household deregistration.

Year	Deregistrations
2016-17	40
2017-18	34
2018-19	40
2020-21	42
2021-22	53
2022-23	39
2023-24	31
2024-25	38

Deregistration by reason:

Reasons	Count
Carer ceased fostering	1
Carer retirement	11
Ceased fostering because the family adopted the child/children	1
Ceased fostering because the family took out a special guardianship	13
Initiated by fostering service	7
Personal carer circumstances	3
Transferred to IFA	2

This table illustrated an increase in carers resigning to improve the permanence plans for the children they care for. 14 carers left fostering due to either adopting or having a special guardianship order for the children they care for.

There has been a reduction in the number of carers leaving to pursue fostering with Independent Fostering agencies and of those that did, all of these were in the wake of practice related difficulties that were addressed by the service. Of the de-registrations that were initiated by the foster carers, 11 were due to retirement and 3 connected carers ceased to care for the children due to the outcome of the care proceedings.

Carers Ethnicity

As part of our ongoing recruitment campaign we are continuing to make efforts to reach a more diverse cohort of prospective carers. As noted within this report, we have been reaching out to different faith groups and attending a range of community events that celebrate difference.

Description	Count	%
British	83	85%
Any Other White Background	2	2%
African	1	1%
Unknown	1	1%
Caribbean	3	3%
Any Other Ethnic Group	1	1%
Gypsy / Romany	1	1%
White and Asian	1	1%
Irish	1	1%
Any Other Black Background	1	1%
Bangladeshi	1	1%
Any Other Mixed Background	1	1%
Not Yet Obtained	1	1%

Kinship and Post Order Team

The Kinship and Post Order Team is responsible for assessing potential relatives and friends who step in as alternative caregivers when a child cannot stay with their biological parents.

This team carries out both scheduled and urgent assessments. The team organises events for the special guardians and their families and monthly support groups and coffee mornings for carers. For those carers who are employed or live outside the local area, the team offers evening online training sessions.

The Kinship and Post Order Team arranges specific training sessions that focus on understanding the assessment process and the Special Guardianship Orders. These sessions explore the various types of legal orders, their implications, and guide participants on how to ask pertinent questions to fully comprehend each order's impact and responsibilities.

Following the granting of special guardianship orders, the team has been actively providing support to special guardians requesting support. 2024-25, there are a total of 233 special guardian families looking after 269 children and young people. Medway is currently financially supporting 255 children subject of Special Guardianship Orders.

Over the past year, they have successfully submitted 20 applications to the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund, securing a total of £18,000 in therapeutic funding. The Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund¹ is a UK government initiative designed to finance essential therapeutic services for families with adopted children, special guardianship orders, or child arrangement orders. It aims to help these families access the support they need more easily, ensuring that children and young people up to the age of 21 (or 25 with an Education, Health, and Care Plan) can receive the necessary interventions to promote positive outcomes.

During April 2024 to March 2024, there was a total number of 223 viability assessments request, resulting in 123 viability assessment, which is an increase from the year before with a total of 187 viability assessments requests. Also, it is important to note the trends of requests in the past years, with 56 Viability Assessments undertaken in the year 2021-2022, and 87 completed in the year 2020-2021. The service re-structure, when fully implemented and staff in post, is designed to manage this increase in demand.

Year	Viability Assessment Requests	Viability Assessments Undertaken
2020–2021	Inconclusive data	87
2021–2022	152	56
2022–2023	187	Inconclusive data
2023–2024 (Apr–Mar)	223	123

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/adoption-support-fund-asf>

Diagnostic Review

In March 2025 the Fostering Service was fortunate to host a colleague from the Local Government Association who conducted a comprehensive diagnostic review of our service. This review provided a valuable opportunity to reflect on our current practice and gain an external perspective on our strengths and areas for improvement. We were pleased to receive recognition for several aspects of our work, including the dedication of our staff, the quality of support provided to foster carers, and our commitment to child-centred practice.

Alongside these strengths, the review also highlighted key areas for development, which we have welcomed as constructive and timely. These insights are now being used to inform and shape our Service Plan for 2025/26. By addressing these areas, we aim to further strengthen our service delivery, enhance outcomes for children and young people, and ensure that our fostering community continues to feel supported, valued, and empowered. This collaborative approach reflects our ongoing commitment to learning, growth, and continuous improvement.

5. SERVICE DEVELOPMENT FOR 2025/ 2026

We strongly believe that all children and young people should be cared for by foster carers or Supported Homes Hosts who are trauma informed and therapeutically minded. Our vision is to have a 'whole service culture' of therapeutic and trauma informed parenting. We plan to achieve this through developing a therapeutic model of practice and the use of psychological input to further support social workers, carers and hosts to provide a more special service. We want to ensure that all training, supervision, support and processes for foster carers and social care staff support this culture.

Across the UK over the next two years the Department for Education will invest over £36 million via the Fostering Recruitment and Retention Programme between 2023/25. The programme aims to deliver end-to-end improvements across foster care, by attracting new leads, boosting approvals of foster carers in areas of specific shortage, as well as addressing retention through better support to existing foster carers. Medway has spent the first year of Local Authority Fostering South East in a cluster with Kent, but the two Local Authorities have different demands and budget pressures, so moving into Year 2 of the Local Authority Fostering South East Hub, Medway have moved into a cluster, with Slough, Bracknell Forest, Surrey and West Berkshire.

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

Bracknell Forest Council have been selected by the DfE to lead the South East Fostering Recruitment Hub, and they will work in co-production and collaboration with the 17 Local Authority cluster members to realise the vision for the programme to increase sufficiency in the South East.

Local Authority cluster members for Year 1 include Bracknell Forest, Brighton and Hove, Kent, Medway, Achieving for Children (Richmond, Kingston and Windsor and Maidenhead), Brighter Futures for Children (Reading), West Berkshire, Oxfordshire, Hampshire, Isle of Wight, East Sussex, West Sussex, Wokingham, Slough, Southampton, Milton Keynes, Surrey, and Portsmouth.

The business model will involve Local Authority Fostering South East managing all enquiries and initial home visits. We are due to interview for the post of Enquiries Officer in the coming weeks. This dedicated worker will ensure timely response to enquiries, 'keeping warm' those that have expressed an interest in fostering for Medway and undertaking prompt initial home visits. Currently this work is undertaken on a duty basis within the team, and we recognise this is not as efficient practice as we want for the service.

Regional vision: Ensure we can support more South East children to be fostered in the South



East reducing reliance on Independent Fostering Agencies.

Regional marketing:

20 Local Authority organisations participating in 'Local Authority Fostering South East' (the regional fostering recruitment hub or hub). Specifically, the purpose of this fostering marketing recruitment strategy is to identify ways, throughout the pilot, that the region will recruit foster carers. It does set out how regional marketing is intended to compliment and support localised approaches driven by our participating Local Authorities. The strategy sets out that the regional hub is intended to focus on the overall values of foster carers embedding a relational approach in all marketing. It will be supported by materials that cover why people might want to foster, the values and impact of the work, the different types of fostering and why you should foster for a Local Authority.

As part of the Local Authority Fostering South East (LAFSE) Hub, Medway Fostering Service will collaborate on regional recruitment through the Fostering Southeast website. Each local authority receives branded materials, including tablecloths, banners, leaflets, and travel mugs and trolley tokens, for use at events. We also share a branded recruitment gazebo with Kent County Council. Medway will continue using Local Authority Fostering South East-branded resources at all marketing and recruitment events to help raise the profile of the regional fostering front door.

Local Authorities will be able to focus on their specific Local Authority offer (including pay, support, perks, training etc), and further build on a relational, human, and personal approach which we know is key to converting potentially interested people into approved foster carers. The focus of campaigns will be three bursts of campaign activity over the first year of the pilot

with an initial focus on awareness raising, followed by an overlapping call to action campaign and then targeted themed seasonal campaigns focused on the residents likely to share the values that will make them good foster carers.

We are pursuing a mix of media channels including TV, social media as well as more targeted events and publications for specific communities. We will not be focusing on broad brush marketing (i.e. buses and roundabouts) and where we use mass media it will be highly targeted (e.g. SkyAdSmart) to the customer segments we have identified are likely to share 'pioneer' values. Through targeted marketing campaigns and engaging messaging, we aim to attract more enquiries and increase our reach to potential foster carers. Our goal is to provide loving homes for children in care and to ensure that we have a sustainable pool of foster carers who can meet the diverse needs of the children we support.

6. CONCLUSIONS

At the heart of Medway's Fostering Service is a shared commitment to providing loving, stable, and high-quality care for all children and young people in supported accommodation and foster care, including those supported by connected carers. We're passionate about spreading the word across our community about the ongoing need for foster families who can offer safe and nurturing homes to children who need them most, local homes for local children.

Over the past year, as highlighted in our 2024–2025 Annual Report, we've made great strides in modernising the service to meet growing demand. These improvements are helping us better support our carers and the children in their care. We have also had the benefit of a diagnostic report from the Local Government Association which has helped the service look back at itself; the recommendations from which have helped shape our service plan for 2025–2026.

We're proud to work hand-in-hand with our partner agencies, local organisations, and the wider community to ensure every child has the opportunity to thrive. Together, we're building a stronger, more supportive fostering network, one that puts children and young people at the centre of everything we do.

Signed: Andrada Pepenel  Date: 1 July 2025

(Head of Service, Provider Services)

Signed: Date:

(Assistant Director, Children's Services)

Signed: Date:

(Portfolio Holder for Children's Services - Lead Member)

