

## **Cabinet**

**26 August 2025**

### **Annual Fostering Report 2024-2025**

Portfolio Holder: Adam Price, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services

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

Author: Andrada Pepenel, Head of Service – Provider Services

#### **Summary**

The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of the business and operations of Medway Fostering Service during the 2024-2025 period. The report also sets out our aims and objectives for the next financial year.

The report has previously been considered by the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 7 August 2025, the comments of which are set out in section 7 of the report.

#### **1. Recommendations**

- 1.1. The Cabinet is requested to note the comments of the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as set out at section 7 to the report.
- 1.2. The Cabinet is asked to note the Fostering Service Annual Report 2024-2025.

#### **2. Suggested reasons for decisions**

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

#### **3. Budget and policy framework**

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

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

## 4. Background

- 4.1. The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of the business and operations of Medway Fostering Service during the financial year 2024-2025. It includes relevant data on the service's performance and activities, as well as updates on the functioning and progress of the Fostering Panel. Additionally, the report outlines the developments that have taken place in the Service throughout the year, as well as any planned initiatives for the upcoming 2025-2026 period.

## 5. Options

- 5.1. There are no options for decision making. This is a report to share information on the progress of the fostering service.

## 6. Advice and analysis

- 6.1. 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.

#### Registered Foster Carers – Annual Overview

- 6.2. As of 31 March 2025, there were 78 generic foster carer households, 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.
- 6.3. We are currently looking after 143 children, an increase from 138 children in placement with Medway foster carers on 31 January 2024.

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

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

- 6.4. 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

The table below illustrates 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.

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

- 6.5. 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 kinship carers ceased to care for the children due to the outcome of the care proceedings.

### Service Development Priorities for 2025–2026

#### Key Objectives for 2025-2026:

- **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 homes for sibling groups and Parent and Child arrangements.
- **Implement the new restructured Fostering Service** as of 1 April 2025
- **Continuation of collaboration with the Local Authority Fostering South East (LAFSE) Hub**, fostering regional collaboration and shared learning.
- **Launch two more Mockingbird Constellation** with specific thematic areas around adolescents and children and young people with disabilities.
- **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.
- **Kinship Allowance Pilot provider application**: submission of application to Department for Education (DfE) to become one of the local authorities to become one of the participating local authorities.
- **Development of the Kinship offer**: implementation of key reforms around kinship offer as outlined in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill.

## Conclusions

- 6.6. 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.
- 6.7. Over the past year, 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 out service plan for 2025-2026.
- 6.8. 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.

## 7. Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

- 7.1. The report was considered by the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 7 August 2025 and its comments are set out below.
- 7.2. The Committee considered the report which detailed activities of the fostering service during 2024-2025. The report also highlighted the aims and objectives of the service for the 2025/2026 financial year.
- 7.3. Members raised several comments and questions which included:
- 7.4. The team was commended for the professionalism of social workers and the quality of reports presented to the fostering panel which were of high standards.
- 7.5. Foster carers were praised for the commitment, dedication, love, and stability given to children.
- 7.6. The Mocking Bird programme was also commended for being transformative and valuable to carers and children.
- 7.7. In response to a question regarding the demand, conversion rates and training for foster carers, the Committee learnt that nationally there was a large demand for foster carers. There has been a decrease in the last three years of prospective carers coming through, this continued to be a challenge locally which led to the decision to join up with the South East alliance to recruit jointly. The training offer for foster carers was in place to provide carers

with skills to deliver the best care for children, this included access to training offers from health and education partners. Foster carers embark on a rigorous journey to becoming carers which was underpinned by fostering regulations and unfortunately some carers did not complete the process for various reasons. There were currently approximately 500 children in care with 100 foster caring households. The team continued to work extensively to increase numbers, with the aspiration for all children to be placed locally.

- 7.8. It was asked whether the 13 conversions to special guardianship orders referenced in the report were as a result of placements with close family members and the Committee was informed that the cases referred to in the report were instances where children had been placed with close extended family members or family friends.
- 7.9. It was asked what support was made available when a carer ceased to be a local authority foster carer and became a special guardian. The Committee learnt that carers continued to be able to access support through the Kinship team. They were able to access training support as well as any additional needs support for the young person such as therapy or counselling. The focus for the coming year for the team was to develop the local offer through the Kinship team.
- 7.10. It was asked what the comparison was between the in-house and independent fostering agencies in terms of the financial offer and the Committee was informed that there was a difference between the financial offer and as a result the policy had been reviewed, would continue to be reviewed on a yearly basis to provide better incentives for carers.

7.11. **Decision:**

The Committee noted the report.

## 8. Risk management

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
<b>Recruitment and retention of foster carers</b>	High national and regional competition for foster carers, with a saturated market and declining number of fostering households.	Implement targeted recruitment campaigns, participate in regional recruitment hubs, and enhance support and incentives for carers.	A II
<b>Staff turnover and service continuity</b>	High turnover with 47.05% new starters in 2024/25, impacting service	Strengthen management support, recruit Assistant Team	B II

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
	stability and continuity.	Managers, and provide robust induction and supervision.	
<b>Placement sufficiency</b>	Insufficient in-house placements leading to reliance on independent fostering agencies.	Expand in-house provision, launch 2 Mockingbird constellations, and increase recruitment of diverse carers.	A III
<b>Regulatory compliance and timeliness</b>	Delays in DBS checks and medical reports affecting assessment timelines and leading to unregulated placements.	Improve coordination with external agencies and streamline internal processes to ensure timely submissions.	B III
<b>Conversion rate of enquiries to approvals</b>	Low conversion rate from initial enquiries to approved carers due to eligibility issues and competition.	Enhance follow-up processes, appoint dedicated Enquiries Officer, and improve applicant engagement.	B III

For risk rating, please refer to the following table (please **retain** table in final report):

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

## 9. Consultation

- 9.1. Foster carers are regularly asked for feedback on various aspects of the service and were fully consulted on the proposed changes to the payment scheme for carers. To strengthen the fostering voice and promote collaboration, the new service manager continued to facilitate a six-weekly forum. This forum serves as a platform for foster carers to share experiences, exchange ideas, and provide feedback. It facilitates open and constructive discussions, encouraging a sense of community and support among Medway foster carers.

## 10. Climate change implications

- 10.1. There are no positive or negative climate change/carbon emission implications arising from the report.

## 11. Financial implications

- 11.1. There are no additional financial implication from 24-25 that have not been agreed and factored into budgets for 25/26. However, the failure to secure enough in-house placements will continue to result in more young people being placed in more expensive external placements creating further budget pressures on an already overspent placement budget.
- 11.2. Failure to continue to develop the service or keep our allowances in line with other Local Authorities and agencies will result in more foster carers resigning and further loss of in-house placements. This in turn forces us to use more external placements. Which will have an impact in budgets in other services.
- 11.3. For the 2025/26 financial year, as part of the one Council Financial Improvement and Transformation Plan the Fostering Service has a savings target of £300,000. This is to recruit and approve more inhouse foster carers to keep children closer to home and reduce the use of external IFA placements. As at quarter one, the service has delivered 35% of this savings totalling £105,831.

## 12. Legal implications

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

### Lead officer contact

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

Email: [andrada.pepenel@medway.gov.uk](mailto:andrada.pepenel@medway.gov.uk)

### Appendices

Appendix 1 – Annual Fostering Report 2024 - 2025

### Background papers

None.