

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

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Early Years

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

Author: Celia Buxton, Assistant Director, Education and SEND

Summary

The importance of early education as a foundation for lifelong learning cannot be over emphasised. Nationally and locally, there is a commitment to supporting providers in meeting the needs of the youngest children; ensuring a suitably skilled and qualified workforce, proficient in pedagogy and with a knowledge of available sources of advice and resources is crucial to this.

This report sets out the findings of the commissioned Local Government Association (LGA) Early Years review; details of recent national and local initiatives; Medway priorities; existing provision; emerging issues and planned next steps within this phase of education.

1. Recommendation

- 1.1 The Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to note the report.

2. Budget and policy framework

- 2.1 Early Years provision is a statutory responsibility under the Childcare Act 2006, which requires local authorities to secure sufficient childcare and ensure access to early education for all eligible children. This decision supports the Council Plan's priorities around giving children the best start in life, reducing inequalities, and improving school readiness.
- 2.2 The proposed actions are aligned with the Council's strategic objectives for Early Years (EY) and are funded through existing resources, including the Dedicated Schools Grant (Early Years Block), and other relevant funding streams.

3. Background

- 3.1 The early years team maintain an overview of the early years provision, ensuring sufficiency of places in high quality and inclusive settings. Currently there is sufficiency of places across the local area. There are approximately 7159 childcare full-time places (30 hr placements) offered throughout Medway, with a take up of 4,174 places.
- 3.2 Medway's early years provision consists of 86 PVI (private, voluntary and independent) settings, 128 child minders and 42 school-based nurseries - totalling 256 provisions. There are 78 primary schools (reception classes) in Medway.
- 3.3 240 early years registered settings out of 256 have been inspected by Ofsted. 94% have achieved a judgement of Good or Outstanding.
- 3.4 The council's oversight of the performance for all early years settings and the standards achieved by the end of the reception year in schools is vital for ensuring a robust early years system that supports child development and prepares them for future education success.
- 3.5 The Medway Family Information Service (FIS) offers support to Medway families in many aspects of family life, such as government funded childcare, parenting support and welfare assistance. It is a free confidential service offering a directory through which parents and carers can access a number of services; this sits alongside the Local Offer.
- 3.6 The profile of children has been changing in recent years, particularly notable in 2024 and 2025. Early years SEND officers, providers and schools report an increase in children with SEND and more complex needs coming into their settings.

4. Support for Early Years Providers

- 4.1 A small, dedicated team of early years SEND officers provide advice, support and training to early years providers on meeting the needs of children in their settings. This advice is at an individual child level.
- 4.2 Medway commission external contractor (Medway Early Years / MEY) for the provision of broader early years support and Early years Foundation Stage (EYFS) assessment, moderation and training.
- 4.3 Additional support is allocated to providers non-school based early years provision that is judged by Ofsted as less than Good or has been served with a Welfare Requirement Notice. The additional support includes guidance to address the recommended areas for improvement.

5 LGA Medway Early Years Review

5.1 In June 2025 Medway commissioned an external peer review to be carried out, with a particular focus on three lines of enquiry:

- SEND –the primary areas of needs, has this changed within a recent period; Engagement with and knowledge that parents/carers and providers have of the support available to them; How effective is the multi-agency work supporting this cohort of children.
- In house support for early years – Is the current service fit for purpose: remit; deployment; SEND knowledge and overall effectiveness and quality of service.
- Special Education Needs Improvement Funding (SENIF) – How funding is allocated; How effective is it in supporting providers meet the needs of children.

5.2 The review team, of 5 highly experienced professionals, spent a week in Medway, interviewing officers, parents and carers and visiting 25 settings.

5.3 The following overall findings and observations were reflected in a more detailed report:

- There are passionate people with a strong commitment to support Early Years (EY) children and families with SEND
- Significant work has taken place in response to the DfE Safety Valve programme and SEND improvement plan
- Family Hubs are providing positive support for children and families in the early years with SEND
- There is a comprehensive and visible Start for Life programme
- There is a strong relationship with the passionate, confident, experienced Medway Parent Carer Forum (MPCF)

However:

- Provision and support in the EY for children with SEND is fragmented, leading to a lack of clarity for parents, providers and partners
- EY SEND has not been an explicit focus within wider strategic planning
- Partnership working with health professionals is inconsistent and underdeveloped
- The right level of support and advice for EY children and their providers is not always in place and graduated
- There are gaps in SEND skills and expertise within the EY workforce
- The current systems to allocate and monitor funding for SEND in EY need consideration

5.4 The review identified nine key recommendations to strengthen inclusive practice and outcomes for children with SEND across early years settings. These recommendations align with Medway's broader SEND Strategy (2025–2028) and Children and Young People's Plan and are as follows:

1	Work at pace to develop a vision and strategy, co-produced with families and stakeholders, for EY and SEND that places the youngest children at the centre
2	Gather and analyse data to identify those most at need considering intersectionality, to ensure resources are targeted, taking account of sufficiency
3	Develop a transparent, responsive and robust approach to (Special Education Needs Improvement Fund) SENIF to meet need
4	Extend joint commissioning arrangements with health, including pooling resources to enable better EY service integration
5	Invest in developing the EY learning environments to better meet the needs of children with SEND
6	Develop a mechanism for the local offer to enable families of EY children with SEND to navigate the system and access the support and services
7	Refocus the EY provision to enable a rich universal offer with clear advice on ordinarily available provision and a graduated response to need
8	Establish a multi-disciplinary team approach with the right skills and level of support matched to need, including transition
9	Develop an integrated training and leadership support offer to build capacity within the sector to deliver the EY and SEND strategy

- 5.5 Actions are underway to establish an Early Years Partnership Group to develop an Early Years Improvement Strategy and drive a system response to these recommendations.

6 National Initiatives, Medway's Response

- 6.1 DfE Extended Entitlement to Childcare is an expansion of government-funded childcare in England, designed to support working families and improve access to early education. The extension of the existing 30-hour funded entitlement for three- and four-year-olds to all eligible working families of children aged nine months and above, is in place, reflecting the commitment set out in the table below to support working families. Officers have promoted the enhanced hours to families through the Family Information Service and continue to monitor and support sufficiency of provision.

Date	Age Group	Hours Offered	Eligibility
April 2024	2-year-olds	15 hours/week	Working parents
September 2024	9 months to 2 years	15 hours/week	Working parents
September 2025	9 months to school age	30 hours/week	Working parents

- 6.2 The introduction of the Wraparound Care (WAC) and Early Adopter Breakfast Scheme initiatives are part of broader efforts to support families, reduce the cost of living, and enhance children's educational experiences.
- 6.3 62 schools / early years providers have engaged with the WAC programme to increase their breakfast and afterschool provision. Allocation of Programme Funding has supported the delivery objectives, including:
- Distribution of funds to providers to set up or expand provision
 - Distribution of capital funding for infrastructure improvements to support new or extended wraparound provision
 - Developing a training programme for settings who are new to WAC or extending existing provision
- 6.4 The next phase of Medway's WAC programme will focus on further increasing capacity across the area and promoting inclusivity through the allocation of capital funding, targeting provision which is not yet providing breakfast or afterschool provision. This is particularly important when provisions are citing a barrier to offering WAC because they are unable to meet the needs of children with SEND.
- 6.5 Distribution of capital funding to settings is being used to remodel existing or create new wraparound provision through a series of practical steps and actions as follows:
- Adapting physical environments, including increasing environmental space to accommodate children with mobility or sensory needs, for example through:
 - Installing accessible toilets, ramps, sensory rooms, or quiet zones and increasing visibility of steps/doors.
 - Ensuring environments are fit for purpose and staff trained, including food prep and hygiene with adequate storage for food, cutlery and PPE.
 - Improving lighting, acoustics, layout and access communication to support neurodiverse children.
 - Supporting IT system upgrades that improve coordination of inclusive services.
 - Developing digital tools for communication and accessibility (e.g., visual schedules, translation tools).
- 6.6 Three schools have successfully been allocated funding through partnership work between the Wraparound Care team and the DfE School Based Nurseries programme; these are now in the planning phase. Officers continue to support settings in this work and oversee the development of the programme.
- 6.7 The DfE Best Start in Life strategy (July 2025): The early years team are participating in Medway's Best Start in Life programme led jointly by Public Health and Children's Services. Through a multi-agency, community-focused model, partners are aiming to improve outcomes for children from conception to age 2, and beyond.

6.8 Key focus areas for early years partners within the education context include:

- early language development and home learning
- accessing support through the Family Hubs across Medway and via outreach and digital platforms
- ensuring family-friendly and accessible help for young children with additional needs
- effective multi agency partnership working across early years provisions, including school-based settings
- improving transitions between early years settings and schools
- ensuring SEND children have access to high-quality early education
- addressing gaps in provision and support inclusive practice across settings
- promote continuing professional development and career pathways for the early years workforce
- meeting a nationally expected target of 75% of children achieving a Good Level of Development (GLD) by the end of the reception year in school by 2028.

7 A renewed focus by Ofsted on the Early Years Sector

7.1 The "Strong Foundations in the First Years of School" paper published by Ofsted in October 2024 offers a comprehensive analysis of how schools can better support children in Reception and Key Stage. The document outlines key messages for early years leaders and has clearly influenced a stronger emphasis on the quality of provision, which is now reflected in several areas of the revised inspection framework, particularly in relation to:

- Reviewing curriculum design to ensure it builds fluency in foundational skills.
- Adapting teaching approaches to meet diverse needs and avoid rigid whole-school models that may not suit early years.
- Strengthening staff understanding of how play supports learning, especially language and executive function.
- Ensuring equity in learning opportunities, particularly for disadvantaged and SEND children.

8 Priorities and planned next steps

8.1 Medway council are recruiting an interim Early Years Transformation Lead to add capacity to the team to enable improvements to be made. The lead will be facilitating an Early Years Partnership Group made up of early years providers, parents and carers, education, SEND, health and social care.

8.2 Lead by the transformation Lead the Early Years Partnership group will work to develop and implement an Early Years improvement plan.

9 Risk Management

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Fragmented SEND support in Early Years	Lack of clarity and consistency in SEND provision may result in children not receiving appropriate support, impacting outcomes and parental confidence.	Establish an Early Years Partnership Group to co-produce a clear EY SEND strategy and implement the nine LGA recommendations.	B III
Insufficient SEND expertise in EY workforce	Gaps in skills and training may hinder inclusive practice and limit the effectiveness of interventions.	Develop an integrated training and leadership support offer to build sector capacity.	B II
Inadequate multi-agency collaboration	Weak coordination with health and other partners may delay or reduce the effectiveness of support for children with complex needs.	Extend joint commissioning arrangements and establish a multi-disciplinary team approach.	C III
Reduced central funding for SENIF	Increasing pass-through rates reduce local authority capacity to support inclusion, risking unmet needs for children with SEND.	Review SENIF allocation mechanisms and advocate for sustainable funding models.	C II
Limited uptake of extended childcare entitlement	If families are unaware or unable to access extended hours, sufficiency planning may be undermined.	Continue promotion through Family Information Service and monitor take-up closely.	C III
Barriers to inclusive wraparound care	Settings may lack infrastructure or confidence to support children with SEND in WAC programmes.	Target capital funding to improve physical environments and provide training.	B III

For risk rating, please refer to the following table:

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

10. Financial implications

- 10.1 The early years block of the dedicated school grant (EYB DSG) is used to support payments to providers, the central early years team, Special Education Needs Improvement Funding (SENIF) and any additional funding requirements which may be required to drive improvement. The 2025-26 EY DSG allocation totals £43.683m.
- 10.2 Payments to providers are made using the early years funding formula's which meet the governments guidelines. From April 2025, the minimum pass-through rate from the EYB to providers increased from 95% to 96%. Thereby reducing the proportion that can be top sliced for central services. From April 2026, the pass-through rate will increase to 97% ensuring that more funding is passed directly to providers but further reducing the funding local authorities have to provide additional central support. Each reduction of 1% is worth c£450,000.
- 10.3 SENIF funding counts towards the 96% pass-through rate. Medway chooses to deduct 1% from all its local early years funding formulas to support SENIF inclusion. In 2024-25 Medway spent £237,457 on SENIF, with a budget of £333,500 for this financial year.
- 10.4 SENIF is a local authority-administered fund designed to support the inclusion of children with low-level or emerging SEND in early years settings. It helps providers meet children's needs when these cannot be addressed through Ordinarily Available Provision alone.
- 10.5 SENIF must be available for all children with SEND accessing early years entitlements, regardless of the number of hours taken.
- 10.6 SENIF can be funded from either or both:
- The Early Years Block of the DSG
 - The High Needs Block of the DSG

11 Legal implications

- 11.1 The service supports the local authority Statutory requirements that are to be met in conjunction with the Department for Education Policy: Early Years and Childcare Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities June 2018.
- 11.2 Under the Childcare Act 2016 and the Education Act 2011, the Local Authority has a duty to:
- secure 30 hours of free childcare for eligible working parents.
 - secure prescribed early years provision free of charge for children under compulsory school age.
 - provide information, advice, and assistance to parents.
 - provide information, advice, and training to childcare providers.
 - follow DfE guidance unless there is a compelling reason to depart from it.

- 11.3 Since September 2017, it has been a legal requirement for all local authorities to establish a SEN Inclusion Fund (SENIF) to support early years children with low-level or emerging SEND who are accessing Funded Early Education Entitlements (FEEE)
- 11.4 Local authorities must have regard to the SEND Code of Practice (0–25 years).

Lead officer contact

Rebecca Smith, Lead Education Professional

Email: rebecca.smith@medway.gov.uk

Appendices

None

Background papers

None