

Children's Services

CORPORATE PARENTING ANNUAL REPORT 2024- 2025

Author: Nicoleta Stangu

Date: July 2025

Version: 1.0



Corporate Parenting Board Annual Report 2024-2025

Foreword from the Lead Member for Children's Services

As Lead Member and Chair of the Corporate Parenting Board, I am proud to present this year's Corporate Parenting Annual Report -a reflection of our continued commitment to prioritising the needs of children in care and care leavers.

At the heart of our work is a shared belief: that every child and young person deserves to feel safe, supported, and empowered to thrive. This belief drives the efforts of our Council, our partners, and our communities, who have worked tirelessly over the past year to ensure that the voices of our children are heard, their needs are understood, and their aspirations are nurtured.

This report reflects the progress we've made, the challenges we face, and the lived experiences of our children and young people. We know that being a corporate parent requires compassion, ambition, and collaboration. I am proud of the work undertaken across Medway to strengthen participation, improve outcomes, and embed the lived experiences of our young people into the design and delivery of services. This is a testament to our collective efforts and our shared determination to ensure that every child in our care is safe, supported, and empowered to thrive.

As we look ahead, we do so with determination and hope. We will continue to listen, to learn, and to act — always with our children and young people at the centre of everything we do. Children Matter in Medway.



Lead Member and Chair of Corporate Parenting Board

Councillor Adam Price

1. INTRODUCTION

This report provides an overview of Medway's Corporate Parenting Services. It also sets out our strategy for continuing to meet the needs of our children in care and care leavers as their corporate parents.

Corporate Parenting is "a collective responsibility, with all officers and members of the Local Authority to act as effective and caring corporate parents for looked-after children, with key roles in improving their educational attainment, providing stable and high-quality placements and proper planning for when they leave care" (DfE 2013, Director and Lead Member for Children's Services – Roles and Responsibilities).

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 placed a duty on local authorities to have regards to seven principles when exercising a function to children in care and care leavers. The principles are:

1. To act in the best interests and promote the physical and mental health and wellbeing, of those children and young people.
2. To encourage those children and young people to express their views, wishes and feelings.
3. To take into account the views, wishes and feelings of those children and young people.
4. To help those children and young people gain access to, and make the best use of, services provided by the local authority and its relevant partners.
5. To promote high aspirations, and seek to secure the best outcomes, for children and young people.
6. For those children and young people to be safe, and for stability in their home lives, relationships and education or work; and
7. To prepare those children and young people for adulthood and independent living.

The functions of the Children Act 2004 Section 10(5) place a duty on relevant partners to co-operate with the local authority in the making of these arrangements, therefore promoting, and ensuring a joined-up approach to improving the well-being of children in their area.

In 2025, the UK government expanded corporate parenting responsibilities through amendments to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. These changes place a new legal duty on all government departments and public bodies including NHS bodies, Ofsted, schools, and the Youth Justice Board, to actively promote the wellbeing and life opportunities of children in care and care leavers up to age 25. Agencies are now required to assess and provide services that support these young people's wellbeing and employment prospects, ensure their participation in relevant activities, and cooperate with local authorities. This duty complements the existing responsibilities held by local councils (see point 1.4) and aims to create a more unified, supportive system across public services.

In addition, the extended duties would require agencies, when exercising their functions, to:

- be alert to matters which adversely affect, or might adversely affect, the wellbeing of looked-after children and care leavers (aged up to 25);
- assess what services or support they provide are or may be available for looked-after children and care leavers.
- seek to provide opportunities for looked-after children and care leavers to participate in activities designed to promote their wellbeing or enhance their employment prospects.
- take such action as they consider appropriate to help looked-after children and care leavers make use of services and access support, that they provide and access opportunities to promote their wellbeing or enhance their employment prospects.

Medway's population of children in care continues to grow. As such, the Council responded in 2024 to make being care experienced a locally protected characteristic to address the systemic inequity and hardship experienced by children in care.

Medway Children's Service's vision highlights the need to work together, keeping children and families at the heart of what we do. This will collectively enable us to ensure children in care and care leavers in Medway are afforded opportunities to achieve their potential.

The Corporate Parenting Board (CPB) meets quarterly, with five sub-groups reporting into the Board. Local Elections in May 2023 resulted in a change of administration, from Conservative to the Labour and Co-operative Group. Councillor Adam Price has remained the Lead Member and had now chaired the CPB since July 2023. Membership of the CPB crosses all key areas, including representatives from elected members, the Council's children in care council (Medway Children and Young People's Council (MCYPC), Council officers including Virtual School, and strategic leads for key partner agencies. The five sub-groups of the Board during 2024- 2025 were:

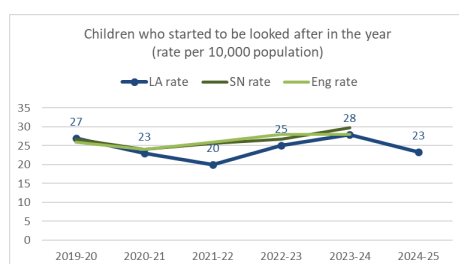
- Listening to You (participation and engagement)
- Housing
- Health
- School, College and Work
- Corporate Parenting Delivery Group

The elected members have continued to embrace the Corporate Parenting Champion roles covering areas such as health, education, housing and participation of our children in care and care leavers. This has continued to play to members' strengths and areas of expertise, bringing another platform for respectful challenge, and encouraging an increased focus on the issues which are critical to children and young people. The subgroups feed back into the Corporate Parenting Board, to ensure our children and young people are fully appraised on the progress and any challenges and what we are doing about it.

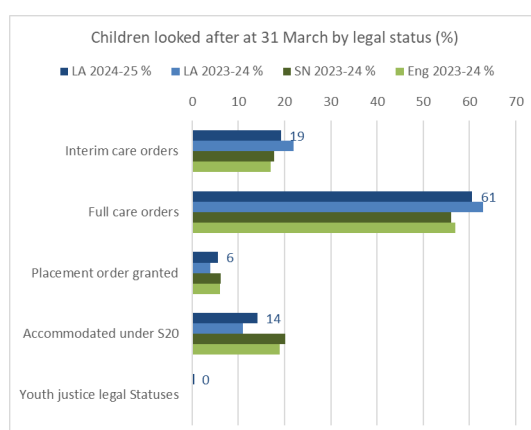
2. PROFILE OF MEDWAY'S LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN POPULATION

The number of children in care in 2024-2025 increased. There were 495 children in care on 31 March 2025, this is a net increase of 19 children compared to a year before and equates to 74.2 per 10k of population, up from 71 in both 2023 and 2024. This is a sharper increase than observed over the previous two years and is attributable in part to the increase in unaccompanied asylum-seeking children accepted into care during 2023-24, as part of the National Transfer Scheme which Medway joined in April 2023. At the end of March 2025, there were 40 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the care of the Local Authority. This was a significant increase in comparison to 23 Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking children aged between 14 and 17 years in our care in the previous year. 156 children entered care during the year, and 134 children left care.

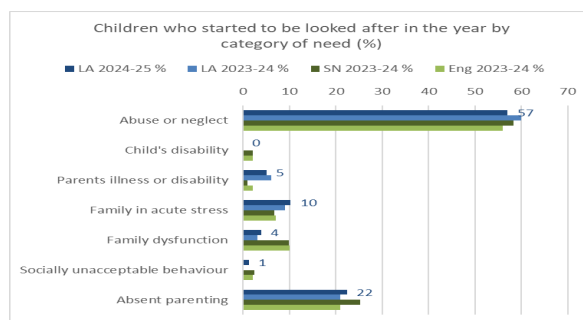
Following two successive years of increases in children entering care, 2024-25 saw a reduction in both the number and rate of children starting to be looked after. 156 children entered the care system in Medway during 2024-25, 23.4 per 10k of population – this is sharply down from last year (190, 28/10k) and is closer to the rate observed the year before (162, 25/10k). This is also significantly lower than the rate observed nationally (28/10k) and in our comparators (29.7/10k) last year.



The breakdown of children looked after at year-end by legal status has remained stable overall, with small shifts of around +/- 2%pp seen across the main statuses: the proportion of Placement Orders and accommodation under Section 20 have increased slightly while Interim Care Orders (ICOs) have dropped, as have Full Care Orders, though Care Orders remain in place for most children in care.

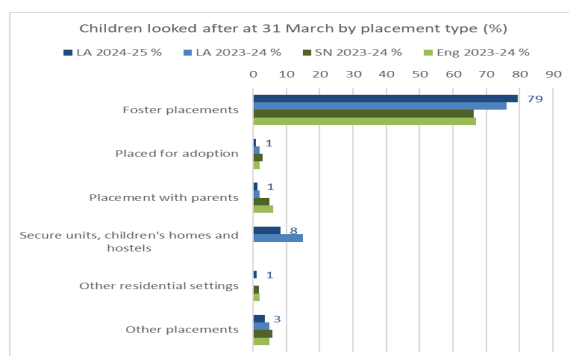


The largest category of need for children entering care remains *Abuse or Neglect*. The proportion of cases in each category remained stable when compared with 2023-24, with small variations seen year-on-year.

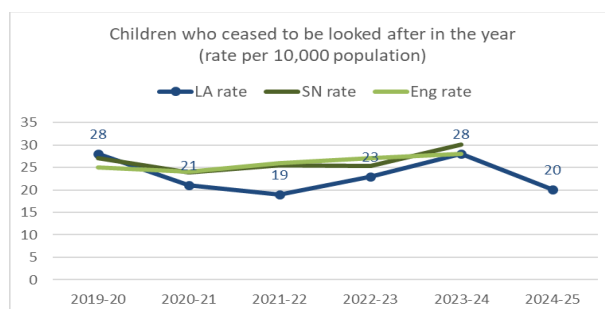


Of the children in care on 31 March 2025, 67% were aged ten or over. 59.9% are male and 40.1% female, with the gender ratio leaning slightly further towards males this year (+2.3%pp) but remaining consistent. While the largest ethnic group continues to be white, there has been a decrease in this cohort of 6%pp; there has also been a notable increase in the proportion falling into the *Other Ethnic Groups* category (4% this year, compared to 0.4% in 2022-23).

Foster placements remain the most popular type of placement for children in care increasing to over 79% (393 children on 31/03/25); of these, 34% (134 children) are in a long-term foster placement, down 5%pp from last year and outside of the 40%-60% range.



The number of children exiting care during the year has decreased - during 2024-25, 134 children ceased to be looked after, equating to 20.1 per 10,000 of population, compared to 185 in 2023-24 (27.3/10k) and the lowest level observed since 2021-22.



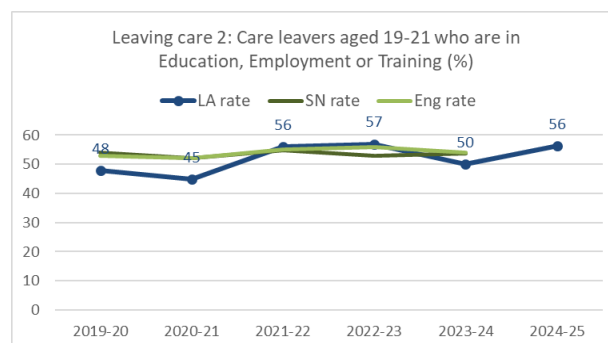
The proportion of children exiting care into adoptive placements has increased slightly, representing 11.2% of the children exiting care, up from 10%. The number of children leaving care under Special Guardianship Orders has also modestly increased, now sitting at just under 13%. Other areas remain stable, though it is notable that no children left care following an age-assessment; last year the number of age-assessments had become statistically significant, but six children in the children looked after cohort subsequently re-entered care following a review of the assessment.

3. PROFILE OF MEDWAY'S CARE LEAVERS POPULATION

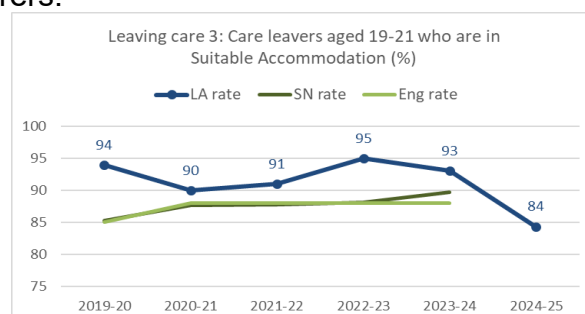
At the end of March 2025, 202 care leavers young people were eligible for a service. The Children and Social Work Act 2017 extends the Local Authority's duties to care for experienced young people up to 25, regardless of their employment, education, or training status. Young people may use our services between the ages of 21-25 for variable lengths. When they cease to have a need, in discussions with them, they may have their cases closed and return when they need a service. This enables them to manage their lives effectively without creating dependency on services. Where young people have established relationships with staff, they maintain periodic telephone informal contact. We write annually to our young adults who have left our care, at their last known address, to remind them that we are available, and they may access a service. For those aged 18-20, we continue to support them as they are yet to be settled into their permanent accommodation and are more likely to require regular help and support. We don't close young people's cases when they receive a custodial sentence. We continue to work with them to plan for release and support them while in custody. The numbers of care leavers have increased slightly during the year, from 178 in March 2024 to 202 at the end of March 2025.

The percentage of care leavers aged 19-21 reported as in-touch has fallen in 2024-25 and now sits at 91.3%; this indicator had previously sat at 96.7% in March 2024 and 99% the year before. Of the remainder, 3.1% (5) refused contact and 5.63% (9) no longer required services; the latter cohort increasing from 1.3% (2) last year.

The levels of care leavers in education, training or employment now sits at 56.3%, almost restoring the level seen in 2022-23 following a drop to 50% last year.



There has been a fall in the level of care leavers aged 19-21 in suitable accommodation, now sitting at 84.4%; this fall is compounded by the decrease of known care leavers who are in-touch. Of this cohort, 36.9 % are living independently, 15.6% live with parents or relatives, 10.6% are living in transitional accommodation, and 8.8% remain with former foster carers.



Care-experienced young people receive services based on their status. There are two qualifying statuses post the age of 18. Those in the Local Authority's care for 13+ weeks before their 18th birthday are relevant young people eligible for a pathway plan. Those who have been in care for less than 13 weeks are defined as qualifying or exit care because of a special guardianship order (SGO) are also qualifying young people. The distinction is that relevant or former relevant (post 18) are eligible for personal advisor support and a pathway plan that defines the support available until their 25th birthday. Qualifying young people receive a service until it is determined that their needs are met. They are not subject to the same minimum biannual review of their plan of support.

Of the 202 eligible young people, 15 are former (over 18) UASC, and they continue being supported by the service as they have accepted refugee status and have recourse to public funds or are awaiting an initial decision from the Home Office on their Asylum application, or have existing appeals with the Home Office. During this period, we had no young people subject to a Human Rights Act assessment being undertaken meaning their appeal rights are exhausted. In this situation, they are subject to deportation from the UK should their Human Rights Act Assessment determine that it is safe for them to return to their country of origin.

4. OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER AND CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE/ HOW WE MEASURE UP AGAINST OUR PROPOSED

Ofsted

The Inspecting Local Authorities Children's Services (ILACS) Inspection of Medway local authority children's services took place in July 2023, with the report published in September 2023, with an overall judgement of 'Good' for Children in care and care experienced young people. Ofsted said about our children in care that:

"The majority of children in care live in stable homes with carers who are nurturing, supportive and caring. Children's needs are well met, and they make good progress. Most children come into care at the right time and when it is in their best interests".

Ofsted graded the experiences and progress of care leavers as Good, stating that:

"The service for care leavers has significantly improved since the previous inspection in 2019. Personal advisers are strong advocates for their young people. They know young people well and are committed, caring and dedicated to improving their lives."

Overall, the Corporate parenting service continues to perform well, with practitioners who know their children and young people well and visit them regularly to provide high-quality interventions.

The next section of the report analyses how we benchmark the priorities, as set in our Corporate parenting strategy 2024- 2025, promises and focuses on some insights into the work being done to deliver the strategy. Our looked after children and care leavers, expect us to assume ambitious corporate parenting responsibilities for them under the following priorities:



PRIORITY 1: Strengthen your voice and influence. By listening and engaging with you, we will use your experience to help us shape future services.

Being a corporate parent goes much further than protecting our children from harm; it places a responsibility upon us to ensure that: *“Children and young people are also valued and respected and can sustain healthy positive relationships”* (Principles of Corporate Parenting - Children and Social Work Act 2017).

Children and young people tell us having a trusted adult, either a foster carer, social worker or personal advisor is key to them feeling cared for, listened to and safe. Linked to this priority, the CPB participation sub group meets bi-monthly and is well attended by professionals across children’s services and has councillor input.

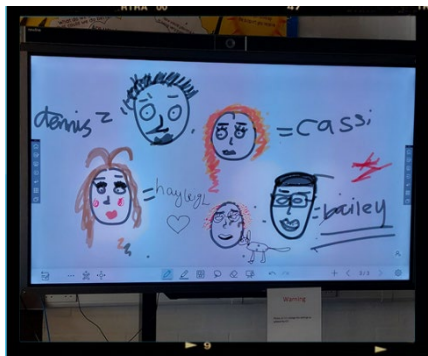
Medway Children and Young People’s Council (MCYPC)

The interface between the Corporate Parenting Board and the MCYPC has continued to strengthen over the last 12 months. A representative of MCYPC attends CPB meetings and acts as a conduit for sharing the views of children and young people, supported by a member of the Young Lives Foundation (YLF).

Children and young people have increased opportunities to share their views and experiences and influence improvements and service developments with corporate parents across the Council.

On 28th January 2025, MCYPC launched the Reverse Buddy Scheme, connecting care-experienced young people with Corporate Parent Board (CPB) members. This initiative enables professionals to hear directly from young people about their experiences, ensuring policies are shaped by lived reality. Every two weeks, young people will meet with professionals for a 30 minute conversation, fostering understanding and improving decision making. Early feedback highlights its impact, with one CPB member stating, “Hearing directly from young people allows us to make more informed decisions that truly support their needs.” As the first buddy meetings begin, this initiative is set to create lasting change. By listening and learning, professionals can make more effective, meaningful improvements to the care system, ensuring young people’s voices are at the heart of decision-making.

On Monday 17th February 2025, MCYPC members enjoyed a well-earned break from discussing and debating the challenges they face in the care system. They attended the Elaine Centre to undertake a cooking activity and regenerate the content on the Information Board.



Mind of My Own

Mind Of My Own (MOMO) has been implemented by Medway Council as a tool to encourage and support participation and engagement of children and young people. Social Workers, and independent reviewing officers are all expected to sign up to MOMO. The MOMO app encourages and enables our young people to express their views at any time, on anything they think is important to them.

The statements generated by a child/young person via MOMO, can then be responded to by the child's social worker. Through regular meetings with MOMO's engagement team, we monitor and track usage across service areas and identify themes of areas of importance from our young people that we can then respond to. IROs and conference chairs speak with children / young people before all reviews and conferences, reminding and encouraging them to use Mind of My Own as a means of participation.

Social workers encourage young people to use Mind of My Own to prepare for all meetings, reviews, visits, or conferences.

The impact of the app has identified individual children who require additional support and/ or significant events that require immediate response from their social worker. For example, in the case of a young person who felt unsafe at school, extra monitoring was provided by the school and a network meeting identified additional resources.

Communication with social workers has increased and feedback provided on each statement received allows for greater monitoring and ensures the child's voice is clearly recorded.

Summer barbeque

In August 2024, the service celebrated with all children in care and care leavers and their carers at a summer barbeque. It was a wonderful end to the summer, and it was a lovely afternoon, filled with fun, activities and good food.



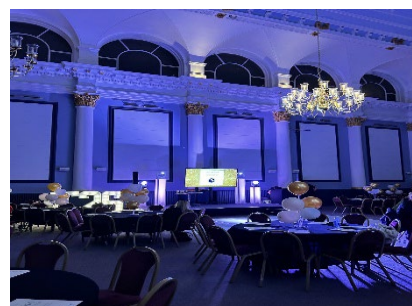
Care leavers week

In October 2024 we celebrated Care Leavers' week. To celebrate our care leavers and recognize their uniqueness and resilience we lit up the Rochester castle in their honor.



Time to Shine event- Celebrating success

On Thursday, 14th November, we hosted the Time to Shine Awards 2024 at the Corn Exchange in Rochester. It was a night dedicated to honoring the achievements of care experienced children, young people, and care leavers. With an amazing 176 nominations across five categories—Achievement, Resilience, Bravery, Inspiration, and Skillful, the event showcased the outstanding talent and determination within our community. 193 young people signed up to attend Time to Shine accompanied by their carers or family members.



The Annual Time to Shine awards was attended by children in care and care experienced young people, supported by children's services staff, officers and elected members.



PRIORITY 2: Provide you and your family with support which will help you to return to live or remain with your families safely at home.

All Children's Services continue to ensure, and remain confident, that the right children and young people are looked after at the right time. The services are working hard to ensure consistency and decisions for children are made timely and, in the children's best interests. The use of Family group conference is key to identifying and developing wider family network support plans and to help family members understand the importance of coming forward and being assessed as alternative carers for the children, where separation is considered.

Removing children from their parents' care is a draconian decision that is made as a last resort and only when it is deemed to be in the children's best interest, with a view to ensuring their safety and overall wellbeing.

Achieving permanence for children has been and remained one of our main priorities. Ensuring the children have a safe and caring environment they can call home, where they feel claimed and loved is our outmost focus. We have seen some delay in achieving permanence for children due to protracted care proceedings. Regular meetings with the judiciary are helpful and we use this platform to raise concerns we have in terms of delay and the direct impact this is having on children and their need for stability and permanence.

Similar to the Public law outline, we have a robust tracking system in place with regards to achieving permanence for children. Medway's Permanency Strategy has continued to lead to consistency across the Children in care service, with permanency planning taking place for all children in care, including children with disabilities and teenagers. Achieving permanence for children and young people is everybody's business and Permanency Panels are being held resulting in options for permanency being discussed and identified early. There is a drive into ensuring that we discuss permanency for children from the front door and options are considered for them.

The permanency dashboard, that has been recently developed, ensures a clear line of sight at all levels and supports planning and progressing permanence for children in a timely manner. The permanency lead has continued to play a key role in reviewing children's permanence options and driving forward the identified permanence plans (reunification, long term care, SGO, adoption, etc.) and in ensuring permanence practice is developed and is consistently applied across all services.

The permanency lead has been in post since September 2024 and has been focusing on improving permanency across the service. Between March 2024 and April 2025, 43 children and young people returned to live with their parents.

In addition to the work undertaken by the social work teams, there has been support available to families from the multi-disciplinary team who can offer additional practical intervention, targeted parenting assessment work and support for parents. Our Family Solutions service provides targeted early help and offers a range of parenting support through the locality-based hubs in the community both on an individual basis and with groups of parents/carers. The Early Help Partnership Board continues to support implementation of Threshold document which sets out when families can be referred to Family Solutions, and when it is appropriate for other professionals to provide early help support for families. In addition, the service has started to utilize the NSPCC Reunification Framework to support timely and well-planned return to families where safe to do so.



PRIORITY 3: Support you to live somewhere where you feel safe, and have a secure, long-term relationship with your carers, can get the most out of life, and have a sense of your identity and your history.

During 2024-2025 work has continued in the service to improve the quality and effectiveness of permanence planning for children, with a strong focus on reducing delay and ensuring permanence is achieved for children at the earliest opportunity.

Permanence is reported to the Corporate Parenting Board and the service has reported that it continues to strengthen a range of activities, including supervision and management oversight, management and performance data, permanence tracking, quality assurance activity, performance clinics, feedback from children, their carers and our partners. This improvement was recognised in the ILACS report from 2023.

This year, the Corporate Parenting Service developed a permanence lead worker, with the support of an interim service manager (over a period of 6 months), to focus on all areas of permanence and tracking of children's outcomes, where permanence needed to be achieved. This included matching work at the time of placing, best identification of long-term matches by social work teams, supporting the professional network to understand and best respond to the short, medium and long-term needs of our children in care, supporting foster carers understand best responses to childhood trauma and neglect.

Strengthening permanence work from early permanence through to older children being cared for, remains an area of ongoing focus and development. As a result, from April 24-March 25, 22 children in 18 placements were long term matched with their carers. Permanence panels run every two weeks, and these are an opportunity to critically review the permanence options for children and collectively identified ways in which permanence can be achieved for our children.

Unfortunately, children subject to care proceedings continue to experience delays in care planning due to protracted court proceedings extending beyond the 26-week

recommended period due to court availability. As a response, Medway has engaged with the Designated Family Judge Trailblazer Pilot, which sought to reduce time in care proceedings. While some progress has been made, we still have a number of children who have been in care proceeding for over 26 weeks. There were 94 families (165 children) in care proceedings at the end of March 2025. Of these, 50 families (91 children) were beyond 26 weeks.

Despite the challenges we continue to see with regard to care proceeding completing, 18 children left care as a result of the courts awarding SGOs, (Special Guardianship Orders) to connected persons in their families, and 43 children remained with their parents at the end of care proceedings (usually by agreement, except for 4 children), 13 children left because of being adopted, 5 exited to live with a person with no parental responsibility.

The Connected Carers Team have continued to support and train potential connected carers and Special Guardians, delivering a “Skills to Care” course to better prepare them for caring for a related child as well as other regular training and more support groups to reduce the risk of placement disruption and to give carers the confidence that they will be well supported with caring for a related child.

Medway’s move to the RAA, as part of the Adoption Partnership Southeast (APSE) in 2020, has continued to deliver significant improvements for children. The Regional Adoption Agency: Adoption Partnership South East (APSE), provide quality adoption care planning advice and support to Medway practitioners, through their adoption permanency planning leads, panel/agency advisors and adoption family finders.

The UK is currently facing a significant crisis in adoption, marked by a sharp decline in the number of prospective adoptive carers. This shrinking pool of adopters comes at a time when the needs of vulnerable children are more complex than ever. Many children awaiting adoption have experienced early trauma, leading to emotional, behavioral, and psychological challenges that require long-term, specialist support.

15 adoption orders were granted for Medway children in 2024–25 and 14 children were placed for adoption in 2024/25. Our looked after children with a plan of adoption have waited 147 days on average from placement order being made to a matching decision, which is better than the national average (218 days). This is evidence that the RAA has continued to focus on recruitment of adopters, robust family finding processes and where there are no adopters within the network, they extended the family finding process on a nation-wide basis.



PRIORITY 4: Provide enough caring family homes in Medway for you so you can stay close to places which are important to you, as long as it is safe to do so.

Over the last year, Children’s Services have embedded the Children’s Services Commissioning team to ensure further integration. The commissioning team are responsible for updating the Sufficiency strategy ‘A Place called Home’ by 2026 this is to

further review and understand the needs and gaps in placement provision and to consider further options to improve sufficiency.

Developments during the year include opening a second Emergency Fostering Provision in partnership with an IFA for children who need accommodating in an emergency, successful creating a Dynamic Purchasing Framework (DPS) to increase the amount of approved provider partners and recommissioned our Parent and Child support provision Elizabeth Court.

Our children's home Eden House was registered by Ofsted in Oct 2024 and was inspected in April 2025 and obtained a 'Good' grading. Having a children's home in Medway, it is in line with our vision to keep children close to their families and within Medway boundaries. We were also successful in a DFE bid to develop a specialist Learning and Disability home at Aut Even and renovate the cabin at Eden House to give us more local capacity.

Medway joined the Regional Care Co-operative in 2024 and continue to positively influence the agenda and to look for opportunities for Medway young people to benefit from these collaborative arrangements.

We have reduced our numbers of unregulated placements from 16 down to 5 in April 2025 by increased availability of provision and strong relationships with providers to prioritise Medway's children and young people. Any unregulated placements are still monitored weekly to ensure extensive support; weekly visits by Social Workers, additional oversight by managers, are in place to provide everyone with the reassurance that our children and young people remain safe and are well looked after.

Medway Children services 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. Recruiting foster carers remains a significant challenge both locally and nationally. Recent Ofsted data highlights this ongoing issue at national level: 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.

Despite these challenges, the 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. Between April 2024 and March 2025, Medway received 366 initial enquiries, resulting in 59 registrations of interest. As of March 2024, 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.

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. 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.



PRIORITY 5: Improve your health and well-being by making sure you can access high quality health services.

Promoting the physical and mental health and wellbeing of children in care continues to be a priority for the Corporate Parenting Board. The Designated Consultant Nurse for Looked after Children represents the Integrated Care Board (ICB) at the Medway Corporate Parenting Board and provides the elected members with an understanding of the successes and challenges being experienced by children in care and the services commissioned to support them. The Annual Report on the health of Looked After Children was yet to be received at the time of writing this report.

With regards to the children's and young people's health needs, there is further work to do to ensure timely health assessments for children when they first enter care. Initial health assessment performance at end of March 2025 was below set target of 80% and sat at 61% which was a slight increase in comparison to 55% in March 2024. Review Health Assessment performance is much stronger with overall performance showing as 95% of children having an updated health assessment within set timescales. This shows further improvement in comparison to March 2024, when 91% was achieved. To improve performance, regular monitoring and tracking activity is taking place within the service, alongside bimonthly meetings with health colleagues as part of the health corporate parenting subgroup. Timely completion of health assessments for those children placed outside of Medway continues to present a challenge, and this is raised at a national level with NHS England, however progress is not achieved at the desired level. There is growing uncertainty surrounding the impact of recent changes to Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) on services delivered to children in care across the UK.

Performance for dental checks currently shows that as of April 2025 88% of children in care have an updated dental check within the last twelve months. This shows a slight increase in comparison to 85% achieved in April 2024. The service monitors dental checks through regular performance clinics. Additional dental sessions are available to children in care with support for access. Dental checks are now also being monitored via the service's weekly performance meetings.

To continue to raise awareness in this area with professionals, children, young people and carers, and to increase access to dental services we hold regular meetings with oral health colleagues to look at trends, reasons for non-attendance/ non engagement and explore how, with support from public health, we can raise awareness regarding importance of oral health. Reminders to parents and carers about the importance of these appointments are being sent out by the service and supported by our fostering colleagues.

Kent and Medway specialist mental health service is a specialist and targeted service providing emotional wellbeing and mental health advice, support, assessment and

treatment for young people and their families across Medway, provided by the Northeast London Foundation Trust (NELFT). The organization also provides a Single Point of Access (SPA) for mental health and emotional wellbeing services. Children in care referred for a non-urgent mental health assessment have a KPI to ensure they are seen within 10 working days and within 5 days for urgent mental health assessments.

At the end of March 2025, 97.8% of our children in care who have been in care for at least 12 months have been assessed by way of Strengths and difficulties questionnaires. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) is a brief behavioural psychological screening tool for 4–16-year-olds which provides a means of regularly measuring emotional and behavioural experiences of children in our care. The average SDQ score for children has fallen slightly and sits at 16.2, compared to 16.4 on 2023-24; a score of 16 or above is regarded as a Cause for concern, and 46.8% of children receiving a score fell into this category, in line with 2023-24. 13.7% received a score between 14 and 16 (Borderline), and 39.5% had a score below 14 (Normal). This information is used to refer children and young people to mental health services to ensure timely support and intervention is made available to them.

The Leaving Care Service have worked with Medway Community Healthcare to develop a specific 'care leavers pathway' which allows for the allocated nurse to continue to support the young person's health needs until they are 19 years old. The team now attends the Children and Families Hub at the Elaine Centre once a week and has a private room for any health discussions to take place at the Elaine Centre. The Personal Advisors also invite the Looked After Children's Nurses to any young people's pathway planning meetings that they feel would benefit from any health support. The pathway promotes partnership working with the personal advisor to foster closer working relationships and avoid duplication for the young person.



PRIORITY 6: Be aspirational to help you to achieve your potential and have the same opportunities to achieve at school, university, or college as your peers. Support you when you leave care to be in employment, education, or training.

This priority speaks to our desire to be ambitious corporate parents who support children through their education, training and employment, enabling them to have high aspirations. For children still in education, the Virtual School will work towards developing work experience to raise their ambitions. The children and young people's educational needs, children and young people who were in the care of Medway Local Authority for the academic year 2024-2025 have continued to be supported by Medway Virtual School (MVS). MVS works with schools to identify and enable schools to implement appropriate strategies of intervention and support at a pupil level. Discussions at each PEP (personal education plan) meeting consider progress in Maths and English (reading and writing). Interventions are identified and implemented. Securing the expected level in reading, SMART targets. PEPs are held three times a year to ensure robust review and oversight, and that additional support is provided in a timely manner, if and when needed.

A significant area of work this year has been the securing and supporting of provision for

post 16 young people who are in care but not engaging in education, training or employment (NEET). The introduction of TCHC, a regulated provision, into Medway has made a highly significant impact. All learners involved in this program (7) have identified destinations for September 2025 which would have not been possible at the beginning of this program.

The Corporate Parenting Board supported the appointment of an Aspirations Officer who has been based within the 16+ service. This post has continued to support young people aged 16-25, to gain education opportunities and to help them find employment or training, with a particular focus on enabling young people to access opportunities in their area of interest. The work includes working with personal advisors as the allocated worker to support young people with accessing employment, training or education (ETE) opportunities, preparing good quality CV's and applications, preparing for interviews, and to advise on any work/education related issues that may arise. The Aspirations Officer has been proactive in providing drop-in services to young people, completes home visits to meet with children and young people and plays a pivotal role in networking and seeking opportunities.

The 16+ Service has continued to work closely with Medway Virtual School (MVS) and the links with other agencies have enabled greater resources and support for care experienced young people in Medway to engage in ETE programs. As such, the percentage of care leavers in education, training or employment has been consistent over the year with 55% of our 16+ cohort of young people being in Education, Training and Employment. This continues to be a priority for the service, and we continue to explore ways in which we can maximize the impact the joint working between staff, virtual school colleagues and aspiration officer can have on the young people who currently don't engage in any form of education, training or employment.

At the end of March 2025, 13 care leavers were attending University. We are now seeing an increase in the number of university applications our young people have made. The recent approved fostering payment review will mean that while our young people attend University, their placement will remain open and they can always have a family/ home to return to. This decision has been welcomed by our children and carers alike.

There are several areas where improvement is still needed. Young people who are care experienced and parenting, pregnant or in custody remain high profile and further work and support is needed in this area. The establishment of the Hub at the Elaine Centre continues to provide opportunities for young people to drop in for advice and support.



PRIORITY 7: Support you to develop your independence skills to enable you to thrive into adulthood.

A core corporate parenting responsibility is to support care leavers so that they can live successful independent lives and the Board has a corporate champion to support

transition to independence.

The 16+ service manager continues to hold monthly 'Move on' panels with housing, finance and commissioning colleagues to discuss and prepare 'move on plans' for 18+ young people who remain in supported accommodation funded by Children's Services. In April 2022 there were 43 young people in social housing tenancies, at the end of March 2025 there were 60.

The 32 young people (March 2025) in supported accommodation includes 7 young people residing in accommodations funded by housing benefit and/ or by Adult Services. At end of March 2025, there were 25 young people aged 18+ residing in supported accommodations funded by children's services and 'Move on' panel, is being utilised to support these young people to secure accommodation via housing.

Young people and care leavers are supported by the specialist housing advisor, who will provide tenancy training. The timing of providing the tenancy preparation training for young people varies; some are ready earlier than others. It would appear we are now able to intervene earlier to reduce accommodation instability. The tenancy training sessions cover amongst other things:

- ✓ looking for appropriate accommodation.
- ✓ their rights as a tenant and those of their landlord.
- ✓ budgeting their money and prioritising their bills.
- ✓ dealing with debt.
- ✓ preparation for the moving day and their responsibilities.
- ✓ being a good tenant; how to avoid problems where possible; and
- ✓ using their setting up home grant wisely.

The specialist housing advisor will also provide training to colleagues within the team on how to access different types of housing, in line with the care leavers' assessed needs, to increase knowledge and resilience in the service and to ensure our care leavers receive the best possible support and representation.

An independence booklet is used in the service with young people to prepare them for independent living and help them to maintain a tenancy. This is currently under review to ensure it is purposeful and helpful and will include a working group and care leavers to develop it. The independence booklet will be devised to reflect young people's individual needs and the support they require to achieve different stages of independent living skills.

The service provides a setting up home grant to care leavers to use for essential items when setting up their own home. Care leavers are supported by their personal advisors to plan and buy items that are deemed necessary and to ensure their first home is as homely and well equipped as possible.

Medway Council also provide council tax exemption for all care leavers up to the age of 25 where they are holding a tenancy in their name. This financial support has been very welcomed by our care leavers.

The 16+ service has continued to advocate on behalf of the young people they support to ensure they are afforded suitable accommodation. In doing so, the service has developed positive working relationships with housing, commissioning and fostering service, together exploring accommodation options for our young people that suitably meet their needs. As such, 96% of care leavers are in suitable accommodation. This suggests significant and continual improvement from the end of 2023-24 (85.4%) and 82.6% the year prior, attributable to an improvement in recording of address tenure types. By contrast, the level observed at the end of 2023-24 was 85.4% nationally, and 81.8% and 78.7% in our statistical and CIPFA neighbours respectively.

As corporate parents we need to ensure that our young people reside in accommodations that are deemed as suitable. Therefore, there is currently a Young Inspectors Project where care leavers are working with the 16+ service and commissioning colleagues to be trained to undertake Quality Assurance inspections of supported accommodation in Medway.

The 16+ service will continue to work in partnership with housing colleagues, commissioning colleagues and fostering services in relation to supported homes and staying put arrangements to increase the number of care leavers who can access such accommodation provisions post 18 years old. This will provide them with greater stability while they are actively supported to develop their independent living skills and confidently move to live independently.



PRIORITY 8: Provide you with opportunities to pursue your interests and hobbies.

Providing opportunities for young people in care and care leavers to explore and develop their interests is a key component of our holistic approach to care. We recognise that hobbies and personal passions play a vital role in building identity, confidence, and emotional well-being. As part of our commitment to personalised support, we ensure that interests and aspirations are embedded within Personal Education Plans and Pathway Plans, allowing young people to co-create goals that reflect their unique talents and ambitions.

We work closely with carers, key workers, and community partners to identify and facilitate access to a wide range of activities—from sports and music to creative arts and digital skills. Funding is made available through local authority budgets and virtual school resources, and we actively seek additional support from charitable organisations to remove financial barriers.

Young people's voice remains central to our approach. We regularly consult with care-experienced young people to understand their interests and ensure that services are responsive to their needs. Through mentoring schemes, and flexible education pathways, we continue to empower young people to pursue their passions, build resilience, and thrive beyond care.

5. **CONCLUSION: Looking ahead**

In 2023, Medway was rated Good by Ofsted and we remain aware of the need to continually evolve and improve services, to identify and meet the needs of our children and care leavers at an outstanding level.

We recognise that while progress has been made, there is still significant work required to improve outcomes for children in care across key areas including education, physical and mental health, emotional wellbeing, preparation for adulthood, and independent living. Increasing permanence and stability remains a central priority, as does ensuring that every child has a positive and enriching experience while in care. We are committed to working collaboratively across services and with our partners to ensure that children and young people are supported to thrive, with their voices at the heart of everything we do.

In light of the recent national reforms, there is a renewed emphasis on strengthening kinship care and placing children closer to home. This approach not only supports continuity in relationships and cultural identity but also enables children to access local services more readily, reducing disruption and promoting stability. We are actively reviewing our practices to align with these reforms, ensuring that our care arrangements prioritise family and community connections wherever possible. This includes enhancing support for kinship carers and developing localised pathways that meet the diverse needs of our children and young people.

Central to our approach is a strong commitment to participation, ensuring that children and young people are not only heard but actively involved in shaping the services that affect their lives. Their insights, experiences, and aspirations are invaluable in designing and delivering care that is responsive, respectful, and empowering. We continue to strengthen mechanisms for meaningful engagement, including through the Medway Children and Young People Council (MCYPC) and the Young Lives Foundation (YLF), who play a vital role in amplifying young voices and facilitating co-production. These partnerships enable children and young people to influence decision-making, contribute to policy development, and hold services to account. By placing their voices at the heart of everything we do, we aim to build a system that truly reflects their needs and supports their journey towards positive outcomes

The Corporate Parenting Strategy will underpin the Corporate Parenting Board's work over the next year, with practice focusing on five key priorities in 2025- 2026 to ensure that we deliver an agile service in line with the promises to our Medway children and young people. These are:

- Ensuring children, young people and care leavers are safe from harm, experience stability of care through stable placements and excellent carers.
- Ensuring our young people will be prepared for independent living, work and to become active members of society to the best of their ability.
- Ensuring we will support and encourage our children and young people to live a happy and healthy lifestyle, by ensuring that professionals work together to devise needs-led services so our children and young people's health needs are met.
- Ensuring we will be there for our children and young people, will support them to

achieve their potential and have the same opportunities to achieve at school, university, or college as their peers.

- Ensuring that we will Strengthen children and young people's voice and influence; by listening and engaging with our children and young people, we will use their experience to help us shape future services

We shall be agile and respond to National Reforms and proposed policy changes to deliver on the above priorities.