

Medway Council
Meeting of Children and Young People Overview and
Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 2 October 2025

6.00pm to 8.54pm

Record of the meeting

Subject to approval as an accurate record at the next meeting of this committee

Present: Councillors: Howcroft-Scott (Chairperson), Mandaracas (Vice-Chairperson), Animashaun, Gilbourne, Gulvin, Hamandishe, Hubbard, Jackson, Joy, Nestorova, Spring and Mrs Turpin

Co-opted Members with voting rights on educational issues only:

Lenny Williams (C of E Diocese Representative, Rochester Diocesan Board of Education)

Substitutes: Keith Clear (Substitute for Lisa Scarrott)

In Attendance: Maria Beaney, Finance Business Partner, Education
Celia Buxton, Assistant Director, Education and SEND
Julia Cox, Head of Childrens Partnership Commissioning
Stephanie Davis, Democratic Services Officer
Lee-Anne Farach, Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive
Aeilish Geldenhuys, Head of Public Health Programmes
Raz Goodred, Home Start Medway
Eunice Goto, Medway Community HealthCare
James Harman, Head of Children's Services Commissioning
Zoe Huggett, Riverside Primary School
Andrada Pepenel, Head of Provider Services
Michele Pink, Customer Relations Manager
Nakiya Rose, Complaints Manager Social Care
Rebecca Smith, Lead Education Professional: Quality & Inclusion
Nicoleta Stangu, Head of Children in Care, Care Leavers and Youth Offending
Dr David Whiting, Director of Public Health

317 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Leanna Rogers, Headteacher Representative, and Medway Youth Council.

318 Record of meeting

The record of the meeting held on 7 August 2025 was agreed and signed as correct.

319 Urgent matters by reason of special circumstances

There were none.

320 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests or Other Significant Interests and Whipping

Disclosable pecuniary interests

There were none.

Other significant interests (OSIs)

There were none.

Other interests

There were none.

321 Meeting Theme: Public Health

Discussion and decision of this item can be found at minute number 321a.

a Taking a System Wide Approach to Health and Early Intervention for Children in Medway

Discussion:

The Committee received a report and presentation which detailed the commissioning and provision of health and support services for Medway children and families, detailing the strategic shift towards early intervention.

Members raised several comments and questions which included:

Education Health Care Plans (EHCP) – it was asked what provision was in place to support children as EHCPs went beyond legal school age. The Committee was informed that Medway Community Healthcare worked closely with the Local Authority to maintain health care plans beyond the age of 18. There was a register held for young people in transition and monthly meetings took place to ensure maintenance of continuity of care, which was crucial during the transition period, to ensure that young people did not fall through the gap.

Signposting - in response to a question on signposting to services, the Committee learned that there had been extensive investment through the Start

for Life funding and in the family hubs so that people were aware of how and where to access services. Partner organisations such as schools, voluntary sector and health disseminated information via their websites. Additionally, Medway Parent and Carer Forum provided support with distribution of information. There were continuous efforts undertaken to ensure that families remained informed about the services and support available to them.

It was further commented that families may not be aware of some of the services identified in the report and some services did not always signpost where relevant. Medway Community Healthcare (MCH) acknowledged that there had been delays in updating their communications and including all signposting within letters to parents, but this had now been addressed.

Referrals – it was commented that there had been a rise in referrals received by services, and it was asked what was being done to manage increased need and the impact on services. The Committee learned that there were several factors for the increase in referrals, some of which were post pandemic, but some trajectory was occurring prior which was further exacerbated by lockdown. The focus and priority now was to identify needs and determine if there was capacity and capability to meet needs without necessarily referring for specialist support. The Start for Life programme had helped to promote a needs first approach. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill reforms would also drive forward change as it sought to instil an early intervention approach and departments were currently working in preparation for the reforms.

It was further asked how it was determined that a referral met the criteria for intervention, and the Committee was informed that all referrals were reviewed extensively. A recent validation of waiting lists had been completed for specialist children's services which highlighted that a large proportion of referrals received met the criteria for a service.

Needs based approach – the needs based approach was commended and it was asked what mitigations were in place to ensure that as a child progressed in life, their emerging needs would be linked and addressed at each stage presented. Officers in attendance acknowledged the need to be mindful when taking this approach and the need to continue to ensure that a holistic approach was taken once a referral received. MCH clarified that assessments were holistic and looked at all needs not just a single diagnosis.

Speech and language - in response to a question on how the effectiveness of the service was measured given the number of sessions allocated, the Officer from Medway Community Healthcare acknowledged that there were challenges with the number of available therapists, however, there were also technical assistants in place who also provided ongoing contact and support for families. The effectiveness of therapy was not measurable by the number of sessions a child accessed, but on measurable outcomes. It was crucial that all involved in the child's life (family and schools) were delivering speech and language support for the child guided by the strategies developed by the specialist to maximise the opportunity for the child's development.

Tiny Talkers - it was asked how parents were engaged with and what was being done to mitigate in instances where English was not the first language. The Officer from HomeStart in attendance confirmed that interpreters could be commissioned to support where necessary, but they had not received many referrals where a family did not speak or understand English to a level that impacted their ability to engage. When a referral was received for the service, the family was invited for an in depth conversation about their needs. Families were extremely engaged with the service; they attended all sessions and welcomed the support provided. A risk assessment was taken at the beginning and end of the programme, and a follow up exercise took place to track progress.

Decision:

- a) The Committee noted the report.
- b) An update report from Children's Services on the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill reforms be presented to a future meeting of this Committee.

322 Adoption Partnership South East, Regional Adoption Agency Annual Report 2024/2025

The Head of Adoption Partnership South East introduced the annual report which detailed the service activity and practice development for the period April 2024 – March 2025.

The Committee learned that:

- The partnership had been successful in securing funding from the Department for Education (DfE) to assist with several projects, to help with practice and continued to deliver services that met changing needs of families, such as development of an earlier permanence scheme and ability to place siblings together.
- Focus was on promotion of growth in community engagement run by volunteer adopters across the region, which was useful for connecting families and supporting each other.
- There was focus on early permanence where possible.
- The Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) worked closely with social workers with adoption care planning and training and building of experience.
- There had been an increase in adoption for Medway children in the last year and significant rise in placement orders for children to be placed for adoption.
- Timescales between placement orders and matching with adopters continued to outperform national average.

Members raised several comments and questions which included:

The partnership was commended for their commitment to improving outcomes for young people of Medway.

Members were supportive of partnership working, which provided good value for money.

Budget – it was asked if Medway received value for money when comparing the amount of Medway's contribution to the budget, which was approximately 23% against that of the other two authorities. Additionally, Medway received less than the 23% contributed back, as only 20% was received when there was an underspend returned. The Committee was informed that when the RAA was set up, it was agreed that Medway would pay into the partnership what its existing budgets were for the first 3 to 4 years. Last year and this year would be the first year that the agreement was enacted to base the budget on demographic demand. The percentages were kept under constant review. The return received of just under 20% was being discussed with the partnership board. The partnership continued to offer exceptionally good value for money as the Council would incur higher costs if it worked independently.

Life story - in response to the work undertaken in terms of continuation of life story work undertaken by foster carers, the Committee was informed that the valuable information gathered by foster carers continued with children when adopted. All children had a life story book created in collaboration with social workers which outlined their full journey as it was vital that children understood their birth history and were enabled to stay connected with birth families. It also enabled adopters to be able to support the young person's culture and identity. There was ongoing work being undertaken to support young people with their identity as it enabled them to have a good understanding when they began to question their life journey.

Support – in response to a question about availability of support for families post adoption, considering challenges experienced in the first 2 years, the Committee was informed that the RAA as well as the National Adoption Agency had been looking into the support available post adoption. It was clear that many families waited until they hit crisis point before reaching out for support which meant that specialist interventions occurred at a late stage. There were changes to the adoption approach which had been put in place this year which would be reported on next year. In order to be more accessible to families, the RAA had put in place a catch-up call service, which had been made possible through Department for Education (DfE) funding and was a scheme for parents to sign up to following their adoption order to encourage them to stay connected. A lead social worker would make annual calls to families to check up, signpost where necessary and provide any additional support.

Local support – it was commented that not all support groups and activities were local, and some families may find it hard to access services due to travel limitations. The Committee learned that the vision was for an increase in local community groups, but this remained a challenge as the partnership was spread across a large region.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report.

323 Complaints and Compliments Annual Report 1 April 2024 - 31 March 2025

Discussion:

The Committee received the report which provided information regarding Children Services complaints and compliments for 2024-25.

Members raised several comments and questions which included:

The team was commended for their performance and work undertaken.

Complaints - it was asked what the driver was for the reduction in numbers of complaints, why non-statutory complaints were not included in the report and what challenges were being experienced in the service. The Committee was informed that non-statutory complaints did feature in the report and that the reduction in statutory complaints was as a result of the non-statutory complaints process that had been developed to manage complaints that did not fall under the statutory process. There was in fact a slight increase in total complaint volumes, but not so much as to cause concern. The priority for the Team was to address the statutory complaints as they had to be managed within statutory timeframes and the team achieved 100% performance with statutory complaints, and just under 90% against a target of 75% performance of non-statutory complaints.

Timeliness of monitoring - in response to a question on what additional monitoring took place in between the three monthly monitoring meetings, the Committee was informed that the previous Complaints Manager had been proactive in meeting with colleagues from services on a regular basis and there was also regular monitoring and tracking of progress. The Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive added that complaints were taken very seriously, with learning from all cases a priority for all staff. Principle Social Workers worked extensively with families to prevent and address any concerns and issues.

Compliments - it was asked what was being done to highlight the compliments received and the officer said that 22 compliments were received in the last year, when measured against complaints, that was equivalent to 1 in 5. As part of mandatory frontline staff training, it was ensured that compliments were actively logged, details were fed back to relevant service managers and also shared through monthly reporting. The Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive added that when staff performed well, it was recognised by the service and the Assistant Directors also included details in their weekly newsletters to staff.

Decision:

The Committee noted the Complaints and Compliments Annual Report 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025.

324 Early Years

Discussion:

The Committee received the report on the findings of the commissioned Local Government Association (LGA) Early Years review; Medway priorities; existing provision; emerging issues and planned next steps.

Members raised several comments and questions which included:

Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND)- it was commented that there was an increase in children with SEND and complex issues and it was asked, in light of workforce gaps and size of the Team if the SEND funding in place was sufficient enough to meet needs. The Committee was informed that Special Educational Needs Inclusion Funding (SENIF) was a large part of the commissioned review, with exploration of whether it was being utilised efficiently. The review highlighted that SENIF funding was not claimed by many settings, there were issues with settings understanding of processes which impacted their ability to claim. This was a gap highlighted by the review and work was being undertaken to encourage and support providers to submit claims. An increase in claimants would enable the teams to better gauge whether it was sufficient or not to meet needs.

Capacity - in response to a question on whether it was known how many children were not accessing early years placements, the Committee learned that there were 7000 available places, with take up of 4000. An annual audit is undertaken, and it was difficult to disaggregate it with children with additional needs. The focus was on working in partnership with settings on being inclusive and addressing barriers to meeting the rise in children with complex needs. Government funding was being utilised on wrap around care, and provision of greater childcare support to enable parents to return to work should they want to.

In response to a further question on what was being done by the service to increase confidence of providers to take on more SEND children, the Committee was informed that whilst the numbers of take up of the free childcare offer was known, it was unknown how many were SEND as children did not receive a formal diagnosis at such a young age. On examining the data of total pupil population, there were 4.3% of children with EHCP in place as they became older, so an assumption could be made of numbers at a young age. The focus however was identifying needs at early age, provision of support with inclusion for early years settings and encouraging to access SENIF and putting in place support for children prior to diagnoses. Few children had a diagnosis at early stage and those that did attended specialist nurseries.

Focus on quality - in response to a comment on how to remain focused on quality with reduced workforce capacity, the officer said that all providers were

Ofsted inspected and when it was known that a setting required additional support, a team was commissioned to go in to address areas of improvement and progress tracked. Capacity was also being built in to share good practice through the Early Years Forum and newsletter.

Decision:

- a) The Committee noted the report.
- b) That an update on the recommendations in this report come back to the board in 9 months.

325 Elective Home Education Focus Group

Discussion:

The Committee received the outcome of the focus group review.

Members raised several comments and questions which included:

- Families that took part in the review were thanked for participation and it was evident that the families appreciated being able to share their experiences.
- The review highlighted the need to ensure that families were assured that their voices would be heard, their views mattered and that they all should receive support tailored to their individual circumstances.
- It was vital that extensive work be undertaken with young people that were being home educated, to build their confidence and encourage them back into the school environment.
- The health section of Education Health Care Plans (EHCP) to be taken into consideration as part of the home education process and decision.
- It was important to remember that the decision to EHE was not always a negative decision and that all decisions must be considered on its individual basis.
- There was a need for a strong focus on communication with families as there were families that wanted their child to return to mainstream education but were reluctant due to lack of communication and partnership working.
- On behalf of schools, the service was thanked for all the support they provided.
- It was vital to bridge the gap between parental decision to EHE by ensuring that schools held meeting with families to explore way to address issues.

Bullying – it was commented that it was disheartening to learn of the high rates of dis-satisfaction of families with SEND children as well as those that experienced bullying and it was asked what specific actions were being taken in mainstream schools to address concerns and how the recommendations from this review would be implemented. The Committee was informed that there were a number of actions taking place to address issues. When a concern was

highlighted by a parent of bullying, each case was dealt with on an individual basis. There were policies in place for Local Authority maintained schools on behaviour management and Academies were expected to manage issues in line with their own internal processes.

In terms of the recommendations from this review which was based on parent and family experience and did not include feedback from schools, the report had been sent to all schools and conversations had taken place in school forums. The national agenda on inclusion had shifted and it was a key priority for all. The DfE was providing additional support and funding to support mainstream schools to be more inclusive and take on more children with complex needs. There was an inclusion conference taking place on 6 November 2025 for schools with Ofsted in attendance to discuss the revised inspection framework.

Feedback - it was commented that in the feedback from parents, 33% gave no reasons for choosing to EHE and it was asked if there was possibility of steering parents to provide that information. The Officer agreed that the percentage was concerning and with the rise in EHE post pandemic, it was noticed very early on that parents were not providing concrete reasons for choosing to EHE. The Team were also notified too late to be able to work with parents to encourage them to keep their child in school. The new Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill reform was welcomed, in that it would provide more steer on decisions that may not be in the best interest of the child. Officers highlighted that there were approximately 1300 families that EHE and only 160 participated and were prepared to actively engage in this review.

Support - in response to a question on whether the choice to EHE resulted in families receiving further support with issues experienced or if it was a hindrance, the Committee learned that it was a disadvantage as all educational responsibility and support was removed from the local authority, unless a child was in receipt of some provision under an EHCP, as that provision would remain in place. There were many websites and charities that supported families with educational provision, but many incurred a cost. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill reform would be instrumental in that it would mandate the register for EHE children and provide the local authority with powers to challenge a decision to EHE, particularly in the case of vulnerable children.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report.

326 The One Medway Council Plan Performance Monitoring Report and Strategic Risk Summary - Quarter 1 2025/26

Discussion:

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 2 October 2025

The Committee received the report which detailed how the Council performed in Quarter 1 2025/26 on the delivery of its priorities, and the Quarter 1 2025/26 review of strategic risks.

In response to a comment regarding the high number of red risks highlighted in the report and that many Key Performance Indicators were significantly below target, the Committee was advised that target-setting and measurement methodologies had been revised to move away from historical practices. Whilst it was acknowledged that there were high numbers of red risks on the report, it was as a result of the ambitious targets set by the services and the narrative alongside the red risks provided detailed reasoning in the report of the position.

Decision:

- a) The Committee noted the Quarter 1 2025/26 progress of the performance indicators used to monitor progress of the Council's priorities, as set out in Appendix 1 to the report.
- b) The Committee noted the Strategic Risk Summary, as set out in Appendix 2 to the report.

327 Work programme

Discussion:

The Committee received the work programme

It was suggested that Members contact the Democratic Services Officer to confirm their availability to support a mini project of working together to make the Committee more inclusive for young people.

Decision:

The Committee noted the report and agreed the work programme as set out at Appendix 1 to the report, subject to accepting the proposed changes outlined in italic text on Appendix 1.

Chairperson

Date:

Stephanie Davis, Democratic Services Officer

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 2 October 2025

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