

Medway Council Youth Service

Peer Review

Final Report

14-17 July 2025



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Executive Summary

Medway Council's Youth Service participated in a peer review from 14–17 July 2025, as part of the National Youth Agency's (NYA) Peer Review Programme, funded by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). The Peer Review is a collaborative programme supporting Local Authorities to meet their Statutory Duty on services to improve young people's well-being (Section 507B of the Education Act, 1996). All Local Authorities and their partners are responsible for improving outcomes for children and young people, and it is recognised that an external and independent view can help to accelerate or consolidate progress.

Medway is situated in Kent in the southeast of England. The unitary authority of Medway was established in 1998 and comprises the five main towns of Strood, Rochester, Chatham, Gillingham and Rainham as well as smaller conurbations.

In 2020, the population of Medway was 279,142, representing a growth of 6.2% within the last decade¹. The population growth in Medway is primarily due to natural growth, as migration to Medway has decreased since 2011/12. Medway has a younger population when compared to England and the Southeast.

In 2011, most of the population in Medway was White (89.6%), followed by Asian and Asian British (5.2%), Black, African, Caribbean and Black British (2.5%), Mixed (2%), and other ethnic groups (0.7%)

In 2020 Medway had 26,656 young people aged 5–11 years, 21,121 aged 11–16 years, 9856 aged 16–18 years and 25,403 aged 18–25 years. This puts Medway Youth Service's main cohort of those aged 11–18 years at 30,977.

Medway Youth Service works with young people aged 8–19 years old (25 for those with a disability) offering somewhere to go, something to do and someone to talk to in their leisure time. It delivers a range of social, sports, creative and fun activities, supporting young people to learn new skills and socialise in a safe, positive way. Youth Service activities are co-created with young people, involving them in planning and developing projects that support them to tackle issues that concern them.



The service aims to provide:

- Inspiring activities each session, including sports, arts and personal development.
- Events where young people meet, compete and collaborate with each other
- Residential and other trips to boost confidence and broaden horizons
- Targeted programmes for young people at risk (i.e. child sexual exploitation, children who are missing from home or are and children involved with gangs)
- Information, advice and guidance to NEET young people.

Medway Youth Service Statement of Purpose

The Service delivers Universal (Open Access) and Targeted provision.

Universal delivery is organised across **four areas**:

- **Strood and Peninsula**
- **Chatham and Walderslade**
- **Luton and Rainham**
- **Gillingham and Twydall**

Each area is designed to cover similar population and need levels based on a range of data collected and analysed in 2017 as part of the Early Help Strategy. Each area is funded for a team consisting of a Senior Youth Development Worker, a Youth Development Worker, an Assistant Youth Development Worker and a full-time equivalent Youth Support Worker.

Targeted delivery includes four main **programmes**:

- **Wrap Around Support Project (WASP)** - delivering wrap around support to young people known to Medway Children's service.
- **Contextual Safeguarding** – working with schools and location-based services to reduce the risk of harm for young people away from the home.
- **Medway Hospital Project** - working in both the Emergency Department and on Wards, to engage young people in 'reachable moments' supporting their needs and engagement with community provision.
- **Brief Intervention Counselling** - funding from the Police Crime Commissioner to offer 6 sessions of individual early help support.

Youth Service Presentation, February 2025

Summary Observation

The youth service has a significant positive impact on young people's lives and is highly valued by both young people and external services. There is strong political and senior leadership support. The team is motivated, dedicated, and committed to continuous improvement. However, there is a need for a central strategy and clearer articulation of youth work identity.

Recommendations

There are a range of observations within the main section of the report that will inform practical actions Medway Council should consider. The following are the review team's recommendations to the Council:

3.1 Co-produce a youth service strategy with young people and partners. While it was recognised Medway Youth Service deliver high quality provision, there is a need for an overarching document providing a professional identity for youth work, boundaries which within they work and defining priorities and outcomes. Such a strategy would include a reviewed theory of change model and outcomes framework.

3.2 Develop a rights-based participation strategy across children's services, to adopt a model delivering consistent and quality practice. This would not be owned by the youth service but be part of the wider Children's Service strategy currently being redeveloped. The youth service will be central to the delivery of the strategy embedding a rights-based approach to participation. The Lundy Model is commonly being used by other local authorities to underpin meaningful youth participation and the review team welcome this being introduced in Medway; we recommend a training programme to accompany the implementation of the strategy.

3.3 Continue to develop a model evidencing quality and establishing sufficiency standards. The peer review team welcome the development of a process to ensure quality of practice. The peer review team are supportive of this and encourage further investment in its development.

3.4 Clarify youth worker roles in targeted projects, formalise referral routes and ensure appropriate supervision. The peer review team were struck by the value other services, particularly Children's Social Care, placed on the youth service, but it was also clear an over reliance on youth workers exists. Youth work is seen as critical to the work of allied services but there is a need define its role and formalise referral routes to ensure

appropriate resourcing of the service and understand the value and additionality the service provides. Appropriate supervision should be identified, and clinical supervision should be considered. Further training is available from the NYA for Supervising Youth Workers and reflective practice: [Supervising Youth Workers: Building Culturally Competent, Reflective, and Effective Teams - National Youth Agency](#)

3.5 Map services and make information accessible to stakeholders. Medway Youth Service are aware that they do not know the full scale of Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) provision, including Uniformed and Faith groups across Medway. This needs mapping alongside Youth Service provision to understand gaps and duplication and feed this into a sufficiency audit.

3.6 Review data collection and information sharing systems. The review team heard that the youth service uses a different system to their partners within Children's Services. This impacts on data collected and recording, but also information sharing across partners. The review team would welcome a review of this and consideration of a system that is fit for purpose.

3.7 Invest in Young Medway. Young Medway has been established well to create networking and communication across VCSE partners. There is a real opportunity to develop this further and for it to become a vehicle to foster collaboration and joint working across partners.

3.8 Continue the development of digital youth work. There is an appetite to explore further digital youth work opportunities in Medway and the peer review team would encourage this and ensure a full understanding, including training and development, across the service and partners.

Summary of the Peer Review approach

The process

The peer review team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information to ensure they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent four days onsite during which they met and held open conversations with over 50 professionals and visited six youth provisions, engaging with diverse groups of young people. The review was not an inspection, but a constructive evaluation by invited 'critical friends'.

The Peer Review team

The Peer Review team was sourced specifically to address the areas of focus highlighted by the Council. The team consisted of senior



colleagues with significant experience of leading and managing children's and young people's services within local government and the VSCE sector, supported by an experienced Peer Review manager.

A multi-disciplinary team was selected based on their relevant experience and expertise, including NYA staff, NYA young reviewers and representatives from other Local Authorities:

- Lana Collins & Kemi Odeyemi – NYA Young Reviewers
- Sam Merry – Leicester City Council, Service Manager, Rights & Participation
- Cath Millington – Assistant Director, Child Friendly Lambeth
- Andy Lloyd – NYA Head of Quality & Standards
- Rose Mansfield – NYA Local Policy and Partnerships Manager
- Georgia Graham – NYA Youth Participation Officer
- Kevin Jones – NYA Head of Workforce and Training

This report provides a summary of the Peer Review team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit on 17 July 2025. By its nature, the Peer Review is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback will include areas that you are already addressing and progressing.

5. Framework for Review

The framework for a Peer Review has five key themes an LA can focus on:

- Leadership and Management
- Practice and Impact
- Sufficiency
- Partnerships
- Youth Voice and Participation

We encourage Local Authorities to identify two areas of the framework to focus on in the peer review and Medway Council chose **Practice & Impact** and **Partnerships**.

Practice and Impact covers:

- Youth workers have excellent skills to establish trusting and positive relationships with young people and use this as a basis for support and challenge
- Youth workers understand the needs of young people and enable young people to identify their own needs, goals, interests and concerns through youth work practice

- Impact of youth work is recorded and measured and shapes future plans to ensure effective youth work delivery

Partnerships covers:

- Joint planning with public, private, voluntary and community sectors undertaken to consider access, resource, accountability for shared outcomes and impact
- A distinct and recognised role for youth work is established with partners and other local services
- Working alongside voluntary organisations and local youth partnerships to determine the best use of resource and secure long-term funding

During the on-site visit, the Peer Review team identified several cross-cutting issues that were covered in the final day feedback presentation, and these are included in the main findings below.

6. Young Reviewers

The Peer Review Team had the benefit of the insight and knowledge of two NYA Young Reviewers; Kemi Odeyemi and Lana Collins. While their views and opinions have been integrated throughout the report, below is a summary of the key areas they observed and wish to emphasise.

Grow you own culture

It is recognised that there is a strong grow-your-own culture, which highlights the positive and lasting impact of the youth service. It is clear that the youth workers and volunteers receive excellent training, contributing to a strong service culture which encourages young people to both join and stay in the service. However, there is a general feeling that young people are losing their dedicated spaces across Medway and this dulls young peoples' sense of ownership and passion for youth work and Medway.

Medway Youth Council

The Medway Youth Council is inspiring. The Youth Councillors would benefit from access to formal training on council structures. It is clear that young people value their relationships with youth workers but feel disconnected from decision-making processes. Young people know they are heard but need to be made aware of the impact of their voices in decision making. It is recognised there is an open access approach to the Youth Council allowing new members to join at any time, but there needs to be some targeted recruitment from under-



represented groups within Medway including those from educationally diverse backgrounds.

7. Main Findings

Practice & Impact

Strengths:

Retention of open access youth services

First and foremost, it is fantastic to see that Medway Council has retained and invested in the youth service, delivering a level of open access provision and a commitment to JNC qualifications. Medway considered commissioning youth provision in 2017. However, the decision was made to retain and commit to inhouse delivery, as part of Children's Services. Similarly, a decision was made in November 2024 to rejoin National JNC terms and conditions, after a 7-year period of a local terms and conditions. This is despite national financial challenge for Local Authorities and when many have removed both open access services and JNC terms and conditions.

Knowledge of their communities and needs

Medway Youth Service demonstrates a good understanding of the diverse communities and needs of the children and young people, this includes a focus on geographical issues, areas and need around deprivation and specific groups of young people. This had led to diverse provision tailored to local needs including centre based, targeted, detached and issue-based provision offering a variety and choice for young people. Youth workers take time to build positive and trusted relationships with young people which enable better identification of individual need and tailored support to meet those needs. This also supports the planning of activities and sessions delivered.

Targeted provision

There are examples of strong targeted projects working with some of Medway's most vulnerable young people. The Peer review Team felt all targeted provision was impactful but were particularly impressed with WASP, Reachable Moments (the hospital-based service) and the youth service's involvement in the Mockingbird programme supporting foster carers. Despite the strength of these programmes, it is recognised they are not without challenge, and we explore this further in 'Areas for Consideration'.

Commitment to youth voice

Medway clearly has a huge commitment to hearing the voices of children and young people. We saw ample evidence of opportunities for young people to be involved in decision making and empowered to influence change. As highlighted previously, young people would like a stronger feedback loop to understand their impact of their involvement. Medway Youth Council is a great example of the mechanisms in place. Medway shared that they are currently reviewing their participation offer, with a view to strengthening it.

Leadership

There is committed political and senior leadership to youth service and provision with dedicated investment into the youth service, recognition of the value of youth work and development opportunities. Youth service staff are enabled and have good opportunities to engage in multi-agency training and professional development.

Youth Worker Pathways

Areas for Consideration:

Partnerships

Strengths:

Partners strongly value the Youth Service

There is a strong appreciation for the vital role that the youth service plays in enhancing the lives of children and young people in Medway. During visits to youth provision sites, the review team received highly positive feedback directly from young people, who spoke enthusiastically about their experiences. Partner services also commended the youth service, with praise coming from within the council, including the Youth Justice Service and Children's Social Care. These endorsements reflect the youth service's significant contribution to cross-sector support for young people. The youth service has successfully built and maintained strong relationships with statutory partners. Colleagues across the council highlighted the youth team's flexibility, adaptability, and consistently positive, 'can-do' attitude. This collaborative spirit has enabled the team to place the needs and interests of young people at the centre of their work, while also supporting wider initiatives such as sport and cultural engagement. Their approach has been instrumental in helping other services connect with young people across the area.

Targeted Services

Under Practice and Impact we have already said the review team was particularly impressed by the targeted services that have been developed, acknowledging that many of these are still in the early stages of implementation. Staff involved in these projects demonstrated high levels of enthusiasm and commitment, to the partnership of services and the outcomes and impact they aim to deliver for young people, families and communities. One standout initiative, the escape room, was praised as an excellent and engaging way to attract and involve more young people in youth service activities and a good practice example of partnership work with schools.

Youth Service Events

High-profile events organised by the youth service such as takeover days, conferences, and Pride celebrations were widely valued across the partnership. These events were well-publicised, enabling partners to participate and attend alongside young people. The young people we spoke with specifically highlighted the takeover days as a meaningful and empowering experience.

Partnership Foundation

There is a solid foundation in place for increasing collaborative working with the voluntary and community sector. The support provided through Young Medway has been instrumental in fostering a strong network across partners, paving the way for more integrated and impactful youth services in the future.

Areas for Consideration:

Overview of Youth Service Contribution

Children's social care services highlighted the invaluable contribution of the youth service and its youth workers. However, the review team expressed concerns about an over-reliance on youth workers and unrealistic expectations regarding their capacity particularly in relation to out-of-hours support. It was felt that work developing identity and role of youth work within the service strategy, discussed within practice & impact, will help alleviate this.

To address this, it would be beneficial to develop more robust referral criteria for the WASP service. This would help ensure that youth

workers are assigned appropriate young people and their workload remains manageable.

WASP Referral Criteria and Processes

The WASP project is well valued and has an emerging framework and referral process. There were some concerns raised about the possibility of cases being closed to social care and referred into the WASP team. The Service Management team clarified that this is not the case, and the project works to add additionality, through the uniqueness of a youth work intervention.

Wider services reported that referrals were often based on long-standing relationships between individual workers rather than formal mechanisms. The review team felt consideration should be given to establishing clear referral criteria and processes.

During the review, youth workers felt they were operating reactively in response to referrals, whereas service managers perceived the approach as more proactive highlighting a disconnect that needs to be addressed.

Project Additionality and Funding

It was evident that the projects within the youth service provide valued additionality to wider children's services, including Children's Social Care, the Youth Justice Service, and Public Health. However, further consideration should be given to understanding and quantifying this additionality to support efforts in securing additional funding.

Information Sharing

Improved information-sharing protocols and systems are needed to better connect the youth service with wider council children's services and understand the 'team around the child' to effect information sharing and joint intervention planning.

Staff and managers reported that the information and recording system is not fit for purpose and doesn't capture what the service needs to evidence impact, plan and reflect. There is a clear need to explore alternative software, and it would make sense to align this with that already being used by the Council. We have reported under Practice & Impact the need to review data collections systems and use one recording system. This will enable real time information sharing between professionals across children's services.

Youth Work Spaces and Identity

Medway benefits from a good range of buildings used for youth work delivery. However, some young people and youth workers expressed concerns that these buildings are losing their identity due to the adoption of a ‘hub’ model, which increasingly resembles children’s centres for younger children. There is a need to preserve dedicated youth spaces where young people can take ownership, including the display of their own posters and relevant information.

Voluntary and Community Sector Engagement, mapping and collaboration

Although the review team engaged with only a small sample of the voluntary and community (VC) sector, it was clear that there is a diverse range of views, experiences, and opportunities. Some stakeholders felt their expertise could be better utilised in collaborative efforts, while others were satisfied with their relationship with the council and appreciated the autonomy to run their provision.

There is a need to fully scope, map and understand the breadth of youth provision delivered within the voluntary, community, and faith sectors. Any mapping of VCSE provision could be done alongside that of the Local Authority, to support the identification of gaps and duplication. This will support the sufficiency audit and offer opportunities for streamlining funding and provision. Facilitating joint working across sectors would also strengthen connections between statutory children’s services and community-based projects. This work would enhance capacity and support the utilisation of external funding available to the sector.

Young Medway Initiative

The development of Young Medway presents a valuable opportunity to foster a culture of partnership across sectors supporting capacity building and access to external funding. The peer review team did not speak with a wide range of VCSE partners, however from those we did speak to it felt there is potentially a culture of competition within the sector. The review team would recommend looking at the Bristol Youth and Play Alliance (BYPA). The BYPA is a good example where an infrastructure organisation has led to build a culture of collaboration and trust. The model which has grown in Bristol and organisations freely discuss and share funding opportunities and work together, to bring greater investment and funding to the area. It was felt that Young Medway is well positioned to develop a similar model but equally recognised they would need additional resource for this.

Young Medway have the established relationships with a wide range of partners to support and possibly lead the mapping of the VCSE and

its reach. Again, it is recognised that additional resourcing is required for the scope of this work.

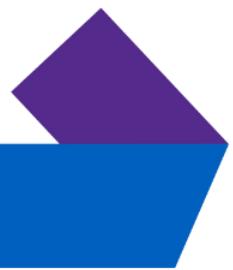
8. Next Steps

We hope that you will find the above findings to be a considered and true reflection of the discussions we had with you, your staff, your partners and young people in Medway. You and your colleagues will now want to consider how you can incorporate the Peer Review team's findings into an action plan, designed against this final report, and we offer the NYA's ongoing support to this, including a six-month review.

Relevant details are included below should you wish to access further support via the NYA.

For further improvement support you can contact the NYA's Head of Quality and Standards: Andy Lloyd - Tel: 07842 437176, email: andyl@nya.org.uk

Once again, thank you for participating in this review and please pass on our gratitude to everyone involved, particularly Roy Smith, Lucy Mattick and Sharon McCauley for their preparation work and day-to-day support of the Peer Review team.





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