

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

5 March 2026

Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Adam Price, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services
(Lead Member)

Summary

This annual report provides an account of the role of the Lead Member for Children's Services as identified in the Department for Education statutory guidance on the roles and responsibilities of the Director of Children's Services (DCS) and the Lead Member for Children's Services (LMCS) (DfE 2012). This report details their ambitions for their areas of responsibility, how they have and will undertake political challenge and leadership and what their priorities and ambitions are for the year ahead. It covers the period from April 2024 until February 2025.

1. Recommendation

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

2. Budget and policy framework

2.1 The areas within the terms of reference of this Overview and Scrutiny Committee and covered by the Lead Member for Children's Services according to the Council's constitution are:

- Children's Partnership Commissioning (0-25 and Residential Care).
- Children's Provider Services (including Adoption, Fostering, and Supported Accommodation).
- Children's Social Care and Safeguarding Services including Safeguarding Board.
- Early Help (including Youth Justice Service (YJS) and Youth Services).
- External Inspections.
- Inclusion.

2.2 This report sets out how as Portfolio Holder for Children's Services I have supported Cabinet and the service in trying to ensure income and expenditure remain within the budget approved by the Council. However, given specific demand led pressures on staffing, placement and client support packages and external assessments, we are currently reporting an overspend in the

region of £2.7 million for the areas within the Lead Member for Children's Services.

- 2.3 I work with other Members and officers to scrutinise the effectiveness, value for money of resources and check that expenditure remains within budget. This is challenging within resource availability, pressures on Council budgets and demands on the service, but I am confident that the service has rigorous oversight and is taking all necessary steps to ensure spending is proportionate and appropriate. I have worked with the service and Council colleagues to ensure that whilst efficiency savings are identified and delivered, the service for our children and families continues to meet our statutory responsibilities.

3. Background

- 3.1 I am proud to be the Lead Member for Children's Services, and I work closely with Children's Services who have continued to work with Medway's children and families providing support and assistance. The Council also works closely with statutory and voluntary partners, to ensure that together we do everything we can to keep children and young people safe and free from risk of harm. I would like to thank all our staff and partners for their hard work and commitment.
- 3.2 In July 2023, Children's Service gained the ILACs (Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services) judgement of Good and since that time the service has been continuing to drive improvement. Local authorities judged to be good at their most recent inspection will usually receive a short inspection that would take place about 3 years after the previous inspection, we are therefore expecting our ILACs from spring 2026.
- 3.3 In between inspections, the local authority would usually receive one focused visit or a JTAI (joint targeted area inspection). Focused visits evaluate an aspect of service, a theme or the experiences of a cohort of children. Ofsted completed two focused visits of Medway Children's Services in 2025.
- 3.4 In April 2025, Children's Services received its first focused visit examining arrangements for Children in Need and those subject to Child Protection Plans. Inspectors noted that senior leaders remain focused on improving support for vulnerable children and recognised that since the 2023 inspection, progress had been made in areas such as support for 16–17-year olds at risk of homelessness, as well as continued development of services for disabled children and adolescents at risk of exploitation.
- 3.5 However, inspectors reported that the quality and impact of social work practice remained variable, with improvements described as fragile and not yet fully embedded. Stating that overall progress had been constrained by increased service demand, instability in senior leadership, and ongoing workforce recruitment and retention challenges.

- 3.6 In November 2025, Children's Services received its second focused visit where inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for Children in Care and this included:
- The quality of matching, placement and decision making for children in care
 - Children in care at risk from child sexual/criminal exploitation
 - The response to children missing from care
 - The experiences and progress of children living in unregistered provision
 - The impact of leaders on practice with children in care.
- 3.7 Headline findings told us that senior leaders in Medway continued to demonstrate a strong commitment to improving services for children in care. The letter also highlighted that decision-making was timely and appropriate, that most children live in stable homes and that children in care benefitted from strong, trusting relationships with their social workers. It also recognised that senior leaders were aware that there was an issue with the timeliness of initial health assessments (IHA's).
- 3.8 I would like to thank Children's Services staff and leaders in Medway for their continued commitment to improvement, and I am pleased and very proud of the progress that has been made.

4. Providing political leadership and challenge

- 4.1 In the most recent focussed visit, Inspectors found that 'the corporate, political and children services senior leadership in Medway are well aligned, visible and focused on continually improving services for children in care. This is delivering steady progress in the quality and impact of services for children in care. Leaders know both the strengths and areas which need to improve in their services for children'.
- 4.2 The Continuous Improvement Plan provides a clear strategic framework for service enhancement. The plan combines operational priorities informed by performance data, clear leadership accountability, and active engagement from statutory partners through the quarterly Continuous Improvement Board.
- 4.3 As a member of the Continuous Improvement Board, I maintain an overview of progress. The Board includes statutory partners, with voluntary attendance from the LGA and our DFE adviser. As a member I can review progress on the plan and contribute to Board discussions about how to support ongoing improvements to the service.
- 4.4 As chairperson of the monthly Children's Services (Children and Education) Oversight Board, I ensure oversight of the effectiveness of Children's social care and education. The Board is attended by DCS, the Portfolio Holder for Education and Schools, Assistant Director's Children's Services and Education and SEND, and all Heads of Service, and reviews performance data. This provides an opportunity for me to challenge and where there are

identified shortfalls, I can question this with the operational managers and ensure they have plans in place to address this.

4.5 As chairperson of Corporate Parenting Board and Lead Member for Medway Children and Young People's Council, I engage with our young people and support them to actively participate in Board meetings, ensuring that their voice is heard.

4.6 In addition to regular meetings with the DCS and Children's Services leadership team, along with the Leader, I meet three times a year with the DCS, the Children's Services Assistant Director (AD), and Head of Improvement to review progress against the Continuous Improvement Plan. This provides the opportunity to scrutinise quality of practice and identify challenges and ways to overcome these. Within these meetings I can review effectiveness, understand the impact of our interventions and support plans for improvement.

5. Championing the Interests of Children and Young People

5.1 I actively support and promote the work of Child Friendly Medway which sets out a vision for making Medway a better place for children to live, learn, and contribute to our community. Child Friendly Medway works together with teams in children's social care and Education, and with partners across Medway to ensure that the voice of the child is heard in all that we do. In January, Child Friendly Medway opened applications for Medway's first Young Mayor which along with 7 deputies will provide a further voice for Medway's Children.

5.2 I regularly visit our services to gain a better understanding of roles and responsibilities of practitioners. I have visited Parklands, our Short Break Home, and Eden House, our Residential Children's Home and next month I will be visiting the 'Aut Even' site, to see the progress being made in the building works that are currently being completed. I attend and support events led by Family Solutions which provides me with the opportunity to meet children, young people and parents and carers and engage with practitioners and multi-agency partners to hear about their role and experiences, and to hear what could improve their services.

5.3 I meet with our workforce regularly, either through attending offices or events as shared above. I have attended staff inspection feedback sessions; both Children's Services conferences led by our practice development service in 2025, as well as attending other training alongside staff and partners. I also attend events such as Time to Shine Awards, which last year was attended by Dame Kelly Holmes, and the Fostering Celebrations held throughout the year. I am proud to be part of events that celebrate the achievements of our children in care and care leavers, and our carers.

5.4 I continue to take part in safeguarding visits to children and families alongside Children's Services practitioners. This is a planned programme whereby together with the DCS, AD (and occasionally the Leader and CEO) we meet

front line practitioners and then accompany them on visits to a child or family. This provides a direct line of sight into practice and opportunity to speak to children and families to hear their experiences. My last visit in January 2026, was undertaken alongside a social worker from the Children in Care service.

- 5.5 As Lead Member I continue to mobilise Council resources, engaging the support of other elected members, to support the events that are run for children in care and care experienced young people, including events such as the Corporate Parenting Summer Barbecue and the care leavers Christmas dinner.

6 Support for key social care service areas

6.1 Commissioning

- 6.1.1 Medway has continued to see increasing challenges in meeting the placement needs of Medway's Children. I continue to work closely with the Leader to oversee the work of the Children's Services AD and Head of Children's Commissioning, Placements and Residential Services, who work together to address the challenges posed by a shortage of available placements for children in our care.

- 6.1.2 To align Medway's growing residential services, in January 2026, Eden House, our residential Children's Home; Parklands, our residential Short Breaks home for children with disabilities; and Aut Even, our prospective residential home for Children with Learning Disabilities and Autism, were placed within the portfolio of our Head of Children's Commissioning, Placements and Residential Services.

- 6.1.3 Medway joined the Regional Care Cooperative (RCC) in July 2024. This is a Department for Education (DfE) funded project to encourage local authorities (LAs) to work together more closely on the commissioning and procurement of placements for Children in Care. Following consultation with Local Authority partners, RCC has now been set up as a nonprofit social enterprise called Home and Future (The South-East Regional Care Cooperative). Medway remains one of sixteen Local Authorities who are part of Home and Future.

- 6.1.4 Eden House was registered in October 2024 and has provided a home to six young people since that time. Eden House is supporting Medway's vision to keep children close to their families within the Medway boundaries. There are currently four young people living in Eden House, with a fifth young person planned to join them by March 2026. In April 2025, Eden underwent inspection and positively achieved Good overall, with key findings indicating that Children living at Eden House are supported by skilled, passionate staff under strong focussed leadership.

- 6.1.5 In November 2025, Parklands short breaks also underwent an inspection and positively achieved Good overall, with key findings indicating a good standard

of care and positive experiences for children and young people accessing short-break provision.

6.1.6 Children's Services continue to commission two emergency placement beds for Children and young people. The impact has been that a lower number of children have needed to be placed in an unregulated placement and it has providing practitioners and commissioners time to identify placements for children and young people in line with their assessed needs.

6.1.7 Medway's innovative collaboration with the Government of Jersey has continued. Our Children's commissioning team supports the Government of Jersey to develop its services, framework and practices to meet its statutory responsibilities for children in the care of the Minister, as well as children in need and at risk.

6.1.8 I have been actively engaged in discussions about the Children's Services budget, holding monthly meetings with the AD, at the Oversight Board and in wider Cabinet discussions with officers regarding the FIT plan. I am aware that effective 'access to resource' panels remain in place, ensuring robust oversight and monitoring of spend on placements and transport.

6.2 **Children's Provider Services (including Adoption, Fostering, Supported Accommodation and Residential Care)**

6.2.1 Following an internal move of the previous post hold, a new Head of Provider Services started in Medway in January 2026. The post holder is responsible for our in-house fostering service, Adoption, the Youth Service and the multi-disciplinary service which provides our workforce with seamless access to timely and effective wrap around support for families, particularly for those on the edge of care. Provider Services also includes the Family Partnership, Adolescent support, Family Group Conferencing, and a Specialist Assessment Team which is delivering high quality work that is acknowledge by the judiciary and avoids the use of Independent Social Workers.

6.2.2 To support the recruitment and retention of our in-house foster carer's, Medway updated the fees and allowances, and additional support and training has also provided to help them care for our more vulnerable children. Recruitment and retention of foster carers remains a priority; national challenges mirror Medway's picture and Medway has a robust recruitment team with ongoing recruitment campaigns. I have heard firsthand about the commitment and dedication of our foster carers and supported homes hosts and actively accept opportunities to meet with them and hear what could be done differently to encourage them to continue fostering for Medway.

6.2.3 Medway remains part of the Local Authority Fostering Southeast which aims to help with the recruitment of foster carers in a planned way by utilising a local recruitment hub. This year, Medway has recruited 15 new fostering households, compared to 7 at the same time last year, and a further 4 households are currently being assessed.

- 6.2.4 Having launched its first Mockingbird Constellation in late 2024, Medway now has three constellations with the third being launched in December 2025. The Mockingbird is an extended family model which consists of a hub home and several satellite homes nearby. These offer regular respite care and peer to peer support as well as regular social activities. Planning for our fourth constellation is underway.
- 6.2.5 The fostering service gained registration for Medway Supported Homes in October 2025. This is a provision that offers homes for young people aged 16 to 25 that require a safe family environment to call home whilst developing their independent living skills. We currently have 15 supported homes hosts, with a further 4 being assessed.
- 6.2.6 The RAA, the Adoption Partnership, Southeast, which is a collaboration comprising Medway, the London Borough of Bexley and Kent County Council, delivers adoption services on behalf of the three local authorities and has been in existence for five years so is now well embedded. In 2024/25, Medway had 14 children placed for adoption, timeliness does remain a challenge, due to delays in court proceedings and the complexities in the needs of children, both locally and nationally.

6.3 Children's Social Work and CYPD

- 6.3.1 Due to the continued high level of demand and complexity within Children's Social Work teams and Children and Young People with Disabilities, the service has been divided into two services, each now overseen by a Head of Service. Both Head of Services roles were successful internal candidates.
- 6.3.2 The Children's Social Work service focuses on support and intervention for children in need, child protection and the initiating of Court proceedings and has eight Children's Social Work teams. One of the teams within Children's Social work supports Newly Qualified Social workers who are undertaking their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment.
- 6.3.3 The Children and Young People with Disabilities Service works with children and young people 0-17 and has three social work teams, and an Occupational Therapy team. The Designated Social Care Officer (DSCO) remains in the service and continues to focus on transitions and preparing young people for adulthood. The DSCO supports robust collaboration with colleagues in Education, Adults, Children's commissioning and our parents and carers.
- 6.3.4 The volume of work coming into the service remains high and complex. Over the last 12 months an average of 420 referrals progress into statutory services, with a significant high number of referrals being received in September 2025. This sustained level means that average caseloads are higher than I would want them to be. At the end of January 26, the number of children subject to child protection plans was 331 and those children subject to Child in Need plans was 433. Both cohorts of children have significant oversight from managers to ensure that Children are subject to the right plan at the right time. I have ensured oversight of the data and of the numbers of

children in need and subject to a child protection plan at least monthly, which assures I am in touch with the pressures on the service and staffing to enable action to be taken when necessary.

- 6.3.5 The service remains focussed on recruitment and retention of its workforce, with different service areas being impacted upon by staff turnover and unfilled vacancies at different times throughout the year. As of 20 January 2026, all Heads of Service and Service Managers across Children's Services were permanent. A quarterly Children's Workforce report is presented at the Continuous Improvement Board.
- 6.3.6 A workforce strategic board is chaired by the Assistant Director of Children's Service to ensure that the Workforce Strategy 2025-2028 is being driven, and actions are being addressed to support building and maintaining a permanent work force. The service launched a new recruitment campaign across social media platforms, focussing on the recruitment video, as well as a comprehensive media strategy ensuring daily posts.
- 6.3.7 The service continues to focus on 'growing our own'. Having piloted two Newly Qualified Social Work teams, one in our children's social work teams and one in our children in care teams, they remain in place as this has ensured consistent caseloads that develop in complexity and numbers over the year. Due to the successful ASYE programme, Medway were able to recruit additional NQSWs who sit within the assessment service. At the end of January, the service had 12 NQSW across the service, 5 step up to social work and 3 apprentices.

6.4 Medway Safeguarding Children's Partnership

- 6.4.1 Medway Council, Kent Police and NHS Kent and Medway are the three safeguarding partners that make up the Medway Safeguarding Children Partnership (MSCP). The purpose of the MSCP is to support and enable local organisations and agencies to work together.
- 6.4.2 Safeguarding cannot be undertaken in isolation, and it is essential that all parties are working together with the Council children's services. During the year, the MSCP holds an Accountable Officers Meeting to ensure the statutory partners remain well informed on the issues facing the partnership and can address strategic issues in relation to staffing resources and overall direction. This is a positive development and is evidence of a strong commitment to safeguarding children at the highest levels across the partnership.
- 6.4.3 During the year, I am aware that the MSCP completed 3 Rapid Reviews with 2 progressing to a Local Safeguarding Child Practice Review. There were multi agency learning points from all reviews. Through the MSCP Executive I am assured that the notification process to trigger LSCPR and Rapid Reviews is effective and that the numbers are in line with expected trends.
- 6.4.4 In August 2025, it was agreed that the MSCP would establish a JTAI Preparation Working Group, in preparation for an inspection. The purpose of

the group is to coordinate, plan, and oversee Medway's preparation and response to JTAs. The group ensures a collaborative, multi-agency approach with shared accountability and ownership across all partners.

- 6.4.5 The MSCP are currently leading on a task and finish group to review and revise the MSCP threshold document to ensure alignment with the Families First Partnership Programme guidance and Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023. The group will ensure the revised document reflects a shared understanding of thresholds for intervention and supports a seamless, multi-agency approach to family help and child protection. The revised threshold document will be launched by 1 April 2026.

6.5 Early Help

- 6.5.1 I continue to champion the delivery of Early Help across Medway and am pleased that our refreshed Early Help and Prevention Strategy was launched in June 2025. The strategy represents our joint commitment with partners to ensure that we work in the most effective, co-ordinated way as early as possible when children and families need our support and help.
- 6.5.2 The quarterly Early Help Partnership Board promotes a shared vision to empower families as equal partners to safely make and sustain positive change. The board is responsible for driving the Early Help and Prevention Delivery Plan to ensure the best possible outcomes for children.
- 6.5.3 Family Solutions has a positive working relationship with Children's statutory services supporting families that step across from statutory intervention. Family Solutions continue to strengthen working relationships with multi-agency partners with the embedding of Early Help Co-ordinators and the Child in Need Reviewing Officer (CINRO) working closely to ensure families are receiving the right level of intervention at the right time.

6.6 Youth Services

- 6.6.1 In Medway, youth work is delivered as a preventative and early intervention service for young people. As such, it plays an integral part in delivering improved outcomes for children and young people. To reduce the demand for statutory interventions in their families' lives, Youth Services has close working relationships with colleagues in a range of other services including Social Care, Youth Justice, Family Solutions and with partners like schools, the hospital and police.
- 6.6.2 In July 2025, the Youth Service welcomed a Peer review undertaken by the National Youth Agency (NYA), aimed to support Medway in strengthening its Youth Service provision, focussing on Practice & Impact, and Partnerships. At the end of the review, I attended the feedback session delivered by the NYA which highlighted both strengths and areas of development for the service and we welcomed a set of recommendations to support further improvements.

6.6.3 The Youth Service continues to be successful in receiving external grant funding and income and continues to pursue external funding to work towards minimising the financial cost of the service to the Council. The external funding provides additional capacity for specific purposes rather than reducing the cost of the youth service.

6.6.4 The Wraparound Adolescent Support Programme continues to be piloted. The programme support young people who are on the edge of care, at risk of exploitation and potential exclusion for their educational setting. The impact of this programme will be continually reviewed, and resource will be adjusted depending on the demand. The aims to offer mentoring and support to young people when then need it, either during the day, in the evenings or at weekends.

6.7 Youth Justice Service

6.7.1 The Head of Corporate Parenting and Youth Justice has now been in post for one year. Medway's Youth Justice Service was last inspected in June 2020 and received a rating of 'Requires Improvement'. A new inspection framework was launched by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) in Spring 2025, and the service await inspection notification, which may come at any time. I am a member of the Youth Justice Board that meets bimonthly and therefore have an oversight of practice and performance data. The board is chaired by the Assistant Director of Education.

6.7.2 Following an external review of the Youth Justice Service the staffing establishment was increased to ensure appropriate resource to meet the need. The service manager has now been in post for almost a year, and whilst continuing to prepare for inspection the service is supported by an improvement lead. An auditing framework is being developed to ensure robust oversight into the quality of practice.

6.7.3 The service continues to develop its victims offer to ensure that the voice of victims is heard and that service delivery is tailored to their need and meets the inspection framework requirements. The service is also working closely with the performance and intelligence team to develop the performance data that is available to practitioners and managers to enable them to keep a close oversight on timeliness.

6.8 Support to children in our care and care leavers

6.8.1 The service continues to engage with children and young people to hear their views. The participation worker works closely with Medway Children and Young People Council (MCYPC) and the wider service, to ensure that the voices of children and young people are gained. I participate in the reverse buddying scheme with MCYPC and regularly have contact with a care experienced young person. I have found this invaluable in supporting my understanding and knowledge of children in care and their experiences. The Mind of My Own app is well used across Medway, however the CP Board and

service continued to consult with children and young people to ensure it meets their needs, and the service.

6.8.2 As Chair of the Corporate Parenting Board, I work closely with our children in care and care leavers service. Our children in care cohort has increased since January 2025 from 482 to 536 and this includes 38 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) aged between 10 and 17 years in our care. The monthly dashboard enables me to see that our children and young people have regular contact with their social workers, and that 98% of them participate in their reviews and meet their Independent Reviewing Officers between reviews.

6.8.3 I continue to champion stability and permanent homes for our children. There has been an increase in the percentage of children in matched long-term fostering compared with a year ago, now 54%, as well as an increase for children and young people who have remained in the same placement for over 2.5 years at 70% (63% in 2025). I am kept regularly updated about placement challenges, including the need to place some of our children in unregulated provision when no other suitable placement is available. Currently we have one child placed in unregulated provision, compared to 7 in January 2025. Efforts are being made to identify a regulated provision for this child, and whilst placed in an unregulated provision, I am confident that there is a robust process in place for overseeing this child.

6.8.4 The service has seen an increase in the numbers of young people in our leaving care service, with currently 210 (202 in 2025) young people receiving support, this includes 29 Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC). The aspirations officer in the leaving care service continues to support the improvement in the percentage of our young people who are in Education, Training and Employment, now 74% which is an increase of 13% since January 2025. Our Care Leavers Hub is situated within the Elaine Centre and continues to facilitate regular parenting groups, independent living skills training, housing advice and support, alongside drop in facilities.

6.9 Corporate Parenting

6.9.1 Corporate parenting is the collective responsibility of the Council to prioritise the needs of children in our care and seek for them the same outcomes any good parent would want for their own children. I am proud to chair our Corporate Parenting Board, and I work closely with other Councillors and officers to deliver against our strategy and improve outcomes for our children in care and care leavers, ensuring the Board maintains its agreed priorities.

6.9.2 The Corporate Parenting Board led the review of the Corporate Parenting Strategy 2025-27, which was relaunched in November 2025. The strategy sets out how we will continue to raise the bar for our children and young people. It is a shared commitment, across all Council departments, our partners and our community, to stand beside them as champions, advocates and trusted adults.

- 6.9.3 The Corporate Parenting Board (CPB) meets quarterly with sub-groups reporting into the Board. Membership crosses all key areas, including representative from the Council's children in care council (Medway Children and Young People's Council (MCYPC), Council officers, elected members and strategic leads for key partner agencies. Corporate Parenting Board provides the necessary leadership that drives an ambitious and multi-agency approach to achieving its objectives. The Board ensures there is feedback via a video, to our children and young people after each Board meeting.
- 6.9.4 There is a structured approach to the CPB function, and the Board works to a thematic work plan. As part of the board, we have active participation from children in care and care leavers representatives through MCYPC. The interface between the CPB and the Medway Children and Young People's Council (MCYPC) continues to be strong. A representative of MCYPC attends CPB meetings and acts as a conduit for sharing the views of children and young people, supported to participate by a member of the Young Lives Foundation (YLF). In September's Board, we listened to a powerful presentation from a young person with care experience, about their journey through care.

7. Medway Virtual School

- 7.1 Education is one of the most powerful protective factors in the lives of care-experienced children and young people. It provides structure, stability and a sense of belonging, often at times when every other aspect of life may feel uncertain. High-quality education does far more than improve attainment; it strengthens emotional wellbeing, builds confidence, expands opportunity and shapes long-term life chances.
- 7.2 As Corporate Parents, we have a moral and statutory responsibility to ensure that every care-experienced child receives an education that is ambitious, nurturing and relentlessly focused on their potential. This means championing their rights, removing barriers to learning, and ensuring that every professional involved in their lives acts with the same determination, advocacy and commitment that a good parent would show. When we get education right for our care-experienced young people, we do more than improve outcomes—we change futures.
- 7.3 I agreed to move Medway Virtual school moved to sit under Education and SEND to ensure this focus was the absolute priority. I am pleased that significant development work has taken place and we have produced our Education Promise for all care experienced children and young people. I have tasked the Virtual School with being unrelentless in delivering our promise and am pleased that the service has restructured and that every young person now has a dedicated education champion to support them, their families and their network.
- 7.4 As lead member, I have delegated membership of the Corporate Parenting Board Education subgroup to Cllr Howcroft – Scott. The group meets regularly and has a work plan that examines in detail the educational

outcomes for our care experienced. I asked the Assistant Director for Education and SEND to chair this board as I am clear this work needs driving from a senior level. The impact of this work is reported back to the Corporate Parenting board and through my monthly oversight boards.

- 7.5 I would like to thank schools for their ongoing support and the significant improvements made in the return rate for Personal Education Plans (PEP). The Autumn 2025 term closed with a PEP return rate of 95%, up from 72% in 2024.
- 7.6 Data also shows that at the close of term there are no Social Worker PEP meeting work steps left incomplete. The move to ePEPs and the targeted work to address underperformance has really driven this improvement.
- 7.7 I'm also pleased to note that the number of suspensions and exclusions of care experienced children is reducing, and I continue to challenge all those working with our children and young people to ensure that their policies and practices reflect a trauma informed approach.
- 7.8 Unfortunately, attendance levels for the cohort remain below national at 89% (average attendance, all ages Sept 25- Dec 25) and academic outcomes have yet to reflect the impact of the recent focussed work and improvements. I continue to challenge, with my colleague Cllr Coombs, our education partners to prioritise improving educational outcomes for those for whom we are a Corporate Parent.

8. Inclusion

- 8.1 Inclusion matters because every child deserves to feel they belong and can succeed in their local school. Nationally, there's been a real shift in focus with more emphasis on early help, stronger SEND support, and a clear expectation that education settings adapt to children, not the other way around.
- 8.2 There is a strong partnership across education and agencies in Medway and a commitment to providing the best quality of education and support for children and families. I recognise the improvements in the local system leadership and the excellent work of our alternative provision providers. Over the last year, more children have been included in their school, and we are seeing a reduction in exclusions and suspensions across the board, most notably for children attending secondary schools. 11 Permanent Exclusions upheld between September and December 2025, compared to 24 for the same period in 2024, with the suspension rate dropping from 0.91 to 0.83 for the same respective period.
- 8.3 I champion and encourage education providers to continue with their work on inclusive practice through regular network meetings, such as the Medway Education Partnership group and the SEND Partnership Board. I have attended the headteacher network meetings, MELA and MSHA and SSALE. I recognise the increasing inclusive practice, with over 46% of children with complex SEND needs able to attend their local school and the changes in leadership and pedagogy this has required. I recognise the amount of work

this rapid growth has made for our schools building from 26% for the similar period last year and thank them for their ongoing commitment.

- 8.4 We held the third Inclusion conference in November 2025 in partnership with the Southeast Sector Led Improvement Partnership (SESLIP). I was pleased to welcome over 160 senior Education professionals together to share learning, discuss current challenges and the ways forward.

9. Closing comments

- 9.1 I continue to be fully supportive of the service and the work which is being undertaken in challenging circumstances for all of our children and young people in Medway and am committed to supporting continued progress across all service areas for which I am responsible.

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Appendices

None

Background papers

None