

Cabinet

7 April 2026

Children's Services Update

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Adam Price, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services

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Summary

This report updates the Cabinet on Medway Children's Services' continuous improvement and the delivery of national reforms aimed at strengthening the workforce, early help, and relationship-based support. It notes positive progress recognised by recent Ofsted focused visits, which highlighted better management oversight, stronger social work practice, and increased stability for children in care.

Medway is continuing this progress through integrated multi-agency work, with particular success in supporting vulnerable groups such as refugee and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children through trauma-informed, culturally sensitive, and well-coordinated support.

1. Recommendations

1.1. The Cabinet is requested to note the report, in particular the scale of system change taking place across Medway services for children.

2. Suggested reasons for decision

2.1. The report is for information only, it provides the Cabinet with an important update on Medway Children's Services' continuous improvement and the delivery of national reforms.

3. Budget and policy framework

3.1. Children's Services improvement activity and the national reforms strongly support the One Medway Council Plan priorities by strengthening the quality and safety of social care, raising educational standards, and enhancing safeguarding across communities. The reforms also reinforce the Council's focus on prevention, wellbeing and early help, while improved support for care

leavers contributes to greater housing stability. Together, these changes help by improving outcomes and life chances for vulnerable children and young people.

4. Background

- 4.1. 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.
- 4.2. 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.
- 4.3. The children's social care reforms, underpinned by the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill focus on early intervention, supporting kinship carers, improving multi-agency working, and ensuring stable homes for children in care. The Bill aims to strengthen children's welfare, safeguarding vulnerable groups, and raising education standards through a more efficient, child-centred system.
- 4.4. The Department for Education Families First Partnership (FFP) programme sets out the practice changes it expects to see. This includes safeguarding partners implementing family help, multi-agency child protection and family group decision-making reforms.

5. Inspection outcomes

- 5.1. 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.
- 5.2. 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.
- 5.3. 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.

5.4. 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).

6. Residential inspections

- 6.1. 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 five young people living in Eden House. 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.
- 6.2. 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.

7. Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children

- 7.1. Currently Medway has 67 refugee children and young people in our care, 38 under the age of 18 (under the National Transfer Scheme (NTS)) and 29 over the age of 18 (care leavers) who have been under our care since they were children but don't have leave to remain, totalling 67 children and young people.
- 7.2. The UASC bike project was financially supported by public health. The 16+ team partnered with the Velo Build Bike project to make it happen. The young people took part in a 21-module programme where they learnt to rebuild mountain bikes from scratch, completed health and safety training, and received the necessary safety equipment. Each resident successfully built and received their own bike.
- 7.3. Since then, the bikes have had a significant positive impact, enabling the young people to travel to college, go shopping in town, attend the gym, and

engage more fully with their community. The success of the project has generated strong interest from other residents, and efforts are now underway to secure donated bikes so that more young people can benefit from this opportunity.

- 7.4. Our refugee children created a wish list of things they would like to experience, and one was to go for a nice meal as most had only had fast food. Commissioning and 16 plus team worked together to get all providers of support and accommodation to put in money to go for a meal (it was fully funded by providers and staff in attendance bought the drinks).
- 7.5. A local Turkish restaurant offered to provide a banquet and the upstairs of its restaurant at a much-reduced cost. Around 25 young people and officers attended. The children loved the meal many saying it was the nicest thing they had ever eaten and staff all went round speaking to the young people understanding their experiences in their placements and ideas and plans for the future. They said they were really happy to engage with staff and grateful to be listened to.

8. Reform of Services for Children

- 8.1. To strengthen accountability, support multi-agency collaboration, and ensure that improvement activity delivers sustained impact for children, young people, and families, the local area partnership has agreed a governance structure and accountable framework for overseeing the children's services reform programme, as detailed in Appendix 1. Activity is coordinated across 5 workstreams:

- Family Help and Early Intervention;
- Strengthening Kinship Care;
- Improving Safeguarding and Multi-Agency Collaboration;
- Increasing Placement Sufficiency ;
- Supporting Care Leavers.

8.1.1. Family Help and Early Intervention

- 8.1.1.1. The national reforms introduce Family Help Services, bringing together early help, child-in-need work and elements of child protection into a single, multi-disciplinary model aimed at supporting families earlier and reducing the need for statutory intervention. Families will receive consistent, relationship-based support led by a Family Help Lead Practitioner (FHLP), who may be a social worker or trained specialist depending on the level of risk. Only child protection enquiries must be led by a qualified social worker. The model prioritises accessibility, continuity, and reduced

stigma by locating support within communities and avoiding repeated step-up/step-down transitions.

- 8.1.1.2. For Medway, consideration is being given into how the current Family Solutions Service model can be expanded to cover Child in Need work and include other agency specialisms, initially attendance, SEND and inclusion.

8.2.1. Strengthening Kinship Care

- 8.2.1.1. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill establishes a statutory definition of kinship care and expands support for children cared for by relatives and friends.
- 8.2.1.2. Medway Council has been selected to take part in a £126 million national pilot which will see increased support for kinship carers. The Kinship Zone pilot aims to support more children to grow up within their family networks, rather than come into the care system. Kinship care is when a child is looked after by someone who is not their parent. This is often a grandparent, aunt, uncle or family friend.
- 8.2.1.3. The Bill also strengthens family involvement in decision-making through family group decision-making meetings at pre-proceedings and requires councils to publish a clear Kinship Local Offer setting out available support.
- 8.2.1.4. The role of the Virtual School Head has been extended to champion the educational progress of children in kinship care. Medway's Virtual School has integrated into the Education and SEND area to ensure this remains an absolute priority, and an Education promise and Education champions are already in place for our children.

8.3.1. Improving Safeguarding and Multi-Agency Collaboration

- 8.3.1.1. Reforms respond to longstanding concerns about fragmented safeguarding arrangements and inconsistent risk assessment. The Bill mandates the establishment of multi-agency child protection teams (MACPT), bringing together local authority, health and police practitioners to oversee section 47 enquiries, chair strategy meetings, and advise on child protection planning.
- 8.3.1.2. Nationally and locally, there is a call for further consideration into the how this will operate, ensuring that safeguarding arrangements remain robust. In Medway, officers are focusing on the preventative work through family help in the first instance, so that learning and impact from this work can inform the implementation of the MACPTs.

- 8.3.1.3. A new duty to share information for safeguarding clarifies that consent is not required where a child's welfare is at risk. The Bill also introduces a single unique child identifier, expected to improve information-sharing across agencies. Measures relating to children not in school strengthen registration requirements, attendance enforcement, and local authority oversight of home education in cases involving safeguarding risk.
- 8.3.1.4. Medway has a significantly higher proportion of children who are Electively Home Educated than nationally. The Bill brings welcome measures in terms of levers to intervene when this is not an appropriate choice for our most vulnerable children.

8.4.1. Increasing Placement Sufficiency

- 8.4.1.1. To address national shortages in suitable placements, the government is investing in expanding foster carer recruitment, modernising children's homes, and improving regional planning. Reforms include removing barriers to fostering, developing more flexible fostering models, and providing £560m capital funding (2026–29) to increase children's home capacity.
- 8.4.1.2. Medway is part of the Southeast Regional Care Cooperative (RCC), being tested to improve forecasting, commissioning and development of provision.
- 8.4.1.3. The Bill also enables new registered placement types for children subject to deprivation of liberty orders, reducing reliance on unregulated accommodation.

8.5.1. Supporting Care Leavers

- 8.5.1.1. The Bill makes Staying Close a statutory duty for all eligible care leavers up to age 25, ensuring consistent housing, employment and emotional support. Wider reforms emphasise lifelong relationships for care-experienced young people through models such as Lifelong Links, strengthened kinship support and improved transition planning.
- 8.5.1.2. From April 2026, Ofsted's inspection framework will shift towards outcomes that help children remain within stable, loving families. Care-related housing support will be delivered through the new Social and Affordable Homes Programme (2026–2036), which replaces and expands the Stable Homes initiative.

9. Advice and analysis

- 9.1. The Ofsted focused visits recognised the steady momentum of improvement across services, highlighting stronger management oversight, better-quality social work practice, and improved stability for children in care. These findings demonstrate that Medway is now on a firmer trajectory of sustained progress.
- 9.2. Medway continues to build on this progress through targeted work with vulnerable groups, including refugee and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The service has strengthened its specialist support, ensuring that refugee children are welcomed safely into the community, receive trauma-informed care, and have access to education, health services, and culturally sensitive support. This work has been commended for its compassion, responsiveness, and collaboration across partners.
- 9.3. The reforms will serve to strengthen multi agency integration and internal system collaboration. Conscious effort and consideration are being taken in the planning of the work to ensure that transition doesn't destabilise the current 'Good' service delivery and hinder the improvement journey.

10. Risk management

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Safeguarding risk to children and young people	Operational non-compliance if implementation of recommendations arising from the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill do not adhere strictly to statutory duties, public law principles, and relevant guidance.	Maintain a clear audit trail of statutory basis, options appraisal, and reasons. Complete EQIAs, DPIAs, and legal checks ahead of decision points. Align local policy updates with forthcoming statutory guidance and secondary legislation. Provide training for leaders and practitioners on new duties (safeguarding, data, workforce).	DII
Reduced quality and impact of service delivery for children	Multiple reforms taking place, place such demand on staffing and resourcing that limits the impact of the reforms or creates additional financial burden.	Early exec agreement; phased rollout; shared funding model to be agreed prior to delivery	BII
LGR	Changes to working practice could misalign with new proposed unitary areas (KCC using different approaches) and add	Working closely with KCC to assure that there is some read across and understanding of differences where appropriate. After June 2026, more purposeful joint arrangements.	CIII

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
	further challenges in 2027, including staff transferability.		

For risk rating, please refer to the following table:

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

11. Climate change implications

11.1. While the reforms themselves do not have direct climate change impacts, some elements of service delivery may contribute to the Council's wider climate commitments. This includes:

- Opportunities to reduce travel through more efficient locality working, hybrid practices, or digital engagement where appropriate.
- Ensuring that any buildings or facilities used for service delivery comply with sustainability standards.
- Considering environmental impact in procurement and commissioning decisions associated with reform work.

12. Financial Implications

12.1. The implementation of the children's social care reforms will have financial implications for the Council. These include potential costs associated with workforce development, investment in early help, redesign of service pathways, and changes required to meet statutory expectations under the reform programme.

12.2. Where government funding is available, such as through reform or improvement grants, this will be used to support delivery.

13. Legal implications

13.1. The Council has a legal duty to meet statutory requirements relating to safeguarding, corporate parenting, early help, and the provision of services for looked-after children and care leavers. Any changes to services must continue to ensure compliance with relevant legislation, including the Children Act 1989, Children Act 2004, the Children and Social Work Act 2017, and associated statutory guidance.

- 13.2. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, introduced in December 2024, is now in its final parliamentary stages, with Commons consideration of Lords amendments taking place on 9-10 March 2026. Key amendments agreed in the Lords in January 2026 - particularly those relating to home education and school attendance, including mandatory national registration and expanded local authority consent powers where safeguarding concerns exist - are currently under review by the Commons. The Bill is expected to receive Royal Assent around Easter 2026.
- 13.3. The proposals within the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill draw their authority from primary legislation, principally the Children Act 1989 and Children Act 2004, and fall squarely within the constitutional powers vested in Parliament to legislate on education and children's social care. Key statutory powers include the Secretary of State's ability to direct local authorities regarding kinship care, family group decision-making arrangements, and safeguarding duties, as well as provisions that amend the Children Act to mandate multi-agency safeguarding structures and the establishment of deprivation-of-liberty orders for children.
- 13.4. In the education context, the Bill draws on the Education Act 2002 and related statutes to extend the Secretary of State's remit over the national curriculum, academy governance, teacher qualifications and conduct, school uniforms, breakfast clubs, attendance, and independent educational settings.
- 13.5. Additional legal considerations include ensuring compliance with equality duties, data-protection obligations linked to unique pupil identifiers, and human rights legal duties, particularly in relation to deprivation-of-liberty safeguards for children.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Reform of Services for Children Governance

Background papers

- [One Medway Council Plan \(2024–2028\)](#)
- [Medway Council – Budget and Policy Framework Rules](#)
- [Medway Council Constitution – Article 4: The Full Council](#)
- [Parliamentary Progress of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill](#)
- [Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill – Impact Assessments \(2025–2026\)](#)
- [Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill – Policy Summary Notes \(January 2026\)](#)
- [Children Not in School and Home Education Amendments \(January 2026\)](#)