

Cabinet

30 June 2026

Kinship Zone Programme Update – Delivery of the DfE Kinship Pilot (April 2026 – March 2028)

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

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Summary

This report provides Cabinet with an update on Medway Council’s role as one of seven national Kinship Zone pilot areas participating in the Department for Education (DfE) Kinship Programme. The report outlines delivery progress to date, including implementation of the Kinship Allowance Pilot (KAP), Family Network Support Packages (FNSPs), and the wider kinship support offer across the period April 2026 to March 2028.

Medway was selected as one of seven national pilot areas to deliver this programme, which represents a significant opportunity to strengthen family-led care, improve outcomes for children, reduce reliance on statutory care, and contribute to national reform and evidence development. The report sets out the delivery model, governance, financial framework, and anticipated impact as the programme progresses. This is a significant opportunity to strengthen family-led care, improve outcomes for children, reduce reliance on statutory care, and contribute to national reform and evidence development.

1. Recommendations

1.1. The Cabinet is asked to note:

1.1.1. Medway’s participation in the DfE Kinship Zone Programme (April 2026 – March 2028), as one of seven national Kinship Zone pilot areas.

1.1.2. The implementation of the Kinship Allowance Pilot (KAP) commencing 1 April 2026.

1.1.3. The delivery of Family Network Support Packages (FNSPs) and the wider kinship support.

1.1.4. The Kinship Pilot Programme Board governance, financial, and data arrangements in place to support delivery.

1.1.5. The expected outcomes and Medway's contribution to national policy development and evaluation.

2. Suggested reasons for decision

2.1. The report is for information only. It provides the Cabinet with an update on Medway Council's role as one of seven national Kinship Zone pilot areas participating in the Department for Education (DfE) Kinship Programme.

3. Strategic Context & Relevance

3.1. Medway's participation in the Kinship Zone Programme reflects national recognition of local practice strengths and readiness to deliver system transformation. KAP strengthens family-based care, improves outcomes for children, reduces demand on statutory services, and contributes to national policy development, and is aligned with Medway's strategic priorities around early intervention, prevention, and improving stability for vulnerable children.

3.2. The programme aligns with national direction to place kinship care at the centre of children's services reform directly supports Medway's strategic priorities by:

- a) Strengthening early intervention and prevention.
- b) Promoting family-led care arrangements.
- c) Improving stability and long-term outcomes for children.

4. Budget and policy framework

4.1. The kinship pilot aligns with the Medway Council's policy and budget framework. The programme directly supports the planning and priorities relating to children's outcomes, safeguarding, and early intervention, particularly stability and permanency within their kinship networks.

4.2. The Kinship Zone Programme is fully funded by the DfE through a combination of Payment, Delivery, and Communications grants. There is no direct pressure on the Council's base budget, although robust financial management is required due to reimbursement arrangements. The offset accrued from allowance payments to the special guardianships assisted by Medway Council will fund FNSPs, reducing budget demand on Medway Council and promoting sustainable outcomes for children and their families.

4.3. Medway Council's corporate parenting framework supports kinship care prioritises family-based care wherever possible; emphasises stability, relationships, and identity; and aligns with national direction to strengthen kinship care as a central pillar of children's services.

4.4. Medway Council's corporate parenting principles are derived from the Children and Social Work Act 2017, kinship care guidance (2024 onwards). Medway Council's strategy and practice emphasise family-first, permanence, participation themes that strongly align with kinship care practice.

5. Background

- 5.1. Medway was selected as one of seven national Kinship Zones as part of the DfE's kinship reform programme. This reflected the strength of existing practice locally and Medway Council's readiness to deliver transformation at pace.
- 5.2. The programme combines two key elements:
- a) The Kinship Allowance Pilot (KAP), provides non-means-tested financial and tax-exempt support to eligible carers of children under 18 years at National Minimum Fostering Allowance rates, and in addition participating kinship carers are eligible to claim child benefit payments;
 - b) Family Network Support Packages (FNSPs), provide targeted, time-limited practical interventions to remove barriers to safe kinship care.
- 5.3. This integrated programme represents a shift towards a preventative, family-led system, supporting children to remain safely within their family networks and reducing reliance on more costly and disruptive care placements, that in several cases are at a distance from children and young people's local networks and kinship roots.
- 5.4. The programme commenced on 1 April 2026, with the KAP application process going live on 15 May 2026. The delayed start was project critical to correctly structure the KAP application to ensure fidelity, fiscal compliance, and DfE national evaluation and policy development.
- 5.5. Current and projected demand includes approximately 258 Special Guardianship carers, with anticipated growth driven by improved identification of kinship arrangements across Medway:

Table 1 – Projected KAP Applications Volume

Year	Estimated Range	Planning Figure	Scenario Planning
Year 1	280–290	285–304	Low Scenario (risk adjusted) - Minimal identification uplift
Year 2	300–315	305–319	Medium Scenario (realistic) - Moderate uplift
Year 3	320–335	320–340+	High Scenario (policy success) - Strong identification & CAO capture

- 5.6. Projected growth will be driven not only by new kinship arrangements but also by improved identification of private law and SGO & CAO arrangements in Medway, which are currently under reported.

- 5.7. KAP primary governance and decision-making is undertaken by the Kinship Pilot Programme Board (KPPB), providing a single forum for strategic decision-making, escalation, and assurance. The Kinship Allowance Programme Board held its first formal oversight meeting on 28 May 2026, with subsequent monthly meetings planned.
- 5.8. KPPB brings together senior representatives from Children's Services, Finance, Legal, Business Intelligence, and other relevant functions, including the Chair (Assistant Director Children's Services, Kinship Zone Lead), Deputy Chair (Head of Provider Services, Programme Deputy), and Strategic Sponsor (Director of People, attends as required).

6. Delivery Approach and Progress

- 6.1. The programme is being delivered through an integrated model ensuring that financial support and practical interventions operate together to deliver sustainable outcomes; this comprises:
- a) Direct intervention: Family Network Support Packages
 - b) Wider kinship support: Early Help, FGDM, Signs of Safety
 - c) System enablers: Governance, workforce, finance, and data systems

6.2. Expected Outcomes

The programme is expected to deliver:

- a) Improved financial stability for kinship carers
- b) Increased placement stability
- c) Reduced escalation to Child Protection
- d) Reduced entry into care and emergency placements
- e) Improved long-term outcomes for children

6.3. Sustainability

The programme supports sustainability through:

- Reduced reliance on high-cost placements
- Early intervention preventing escalation
- Efficient use of public resources
- Long-term system transformation

6.4. Diversity Impact

A Diversity Impact Assessment (DIA) was undertaken and is attached as Appendix 1 to the report.

Key findings include:

- Positive impact on economically disadvantaged families
- Improved equity of access to financial support
- Increased support for underrepresented kinship carers
- Need to ensure accessibility for digitally excluded groups

Mitigations include multi-channel communication and targeted outreach.

7. Risk management

7.1. The Programme is expected to attract positive attention locally and nationally, given its focus on supporting families to care for children within their own networks and reducing reliance on foster care and residential provision. There is likely to be positive local and national press interest associated with Medway's selection as a Kinship Zone.

7.2. Key risks include:

- High demand and application volumes creating pressure on staffing and processing timelines.
- Eligibility decisions accuracy,
- Delays in payment processing, impacting carer confidence and programme credibility.
- Data quality or compliance failures, which could delay DfE reimbursement or affect national evaluation.

7.3. These risks are mitigated through:

- Dedicated, grant-funded delivery roles;
- A multi-disciplinary Evidence Review Panel;
- Strong financial controls using Mosaic;
- Monthly reconciliation and Programme Board oversight; and
- Robust data governance aligned to DfE requirements.

7.4. **Table 2 – Risk Matrix**

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
High demand	Increased applications impacting processing	Recruitment, streamlined processes, panel oversight	B2
Payment delays	Delays impacting trust and uptake	Strong financial workflows, reconciliation, monitoring	B2
Incorrect eligibility decisions	Risk of ineligible payments	Multi-layered panel and QA processes	C2
Workforce capacity	Pressure on teams	Recruitment, training, cross-service support	B2
Data quality issues	Poor reporting/evaluation	Data officer role, QA processes, governance	C2
Communication gaps	Low uptake or misunderstanding	Strengthened communications strategy	C3

For risk rating, please refer to the following table:

Likelihood	Impact:
A Very likely	1 Critical
B Likely	2 Major
C Unlikely	3 Moderate
D Rare	4 Minor

8. Consultation

8.1. Engagement to date has included:

- Internal services (Children's Services, Finance, Data).
- DfE and national programme partners.
- Practitioners and partner agencies.

8.2. Ongoing engagement will continue through:

- Kinship Pilot Programme Board governance.
- Multi-agency partnership groups.
- Feedback loops from practitioners and carers.

9. Climate change implications

9.1. There are no significant adverse climate impacts.

9.2. Minor positive impacts include reduced travel through digital processes, and increased use of online systems and communications.

10. Financial implications

10.1. This programme is funded by a ringfenced grant from the Department for Education, with the programme running from April 2026 to March 2029. Indicative funding allocations have been provided for the first two years, with the third years allocation expected by December 2027.

10.2. The grant is split into three areas of funding, with the kinship allowance element of the programme requiring claims for reimbursement submitted monthly in arrears, up to the maximum yearly indicative allocation. See Table 3 below.

10.3. The admin delivery grant is used primarily to fund core delivery staff and essential operational infrastructure, enabling Medway Council to run the Kinship Allowance Pilot securely, consistently, and in full compliance with DfE requirements. We anticipate 5 additional members of staff will be in post by end of June 2026. The communication grant, was a one-off allocation for the pre-launch and must be spent by 31st May 2026.

Table 3 – DfE Funding

Funding Stream	2026-27 Indicative Allocation	2027-28 Indicative Allocation	Total for the first 2 years	Purpose
Kinship Allowance	£7,750,200	£8,392,500	£16,142,700	Fund actual allowance payments; paid in arrears on evidence submission
Admin Delivery Grant	£170,000	£179,000	£358,000	Staffing, operational delivery, governance
Communications Grant (one-off)	£0	£0	£11,000	Immediate outreach & messaging to eligible carers

11. Legal implications

- 11.1. The programme operates within the Children Act 1989 and associated legislation.
- 11.2. Delivery is consistent with existing statutory frameworks. Eligibility applies to carers with Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) and Child Arrangements Orders (CAOs).
- 11.3. Medway Council and the DfE act as joint data controllers, and all data processing complies with UK GDPR requirements.

12. Local Government Reorganisation

- 12.1. The Department for Education specified that the Kinship Allowance Pilot funding is allocated based on eligible children and carers ordinarily resident within Medway postcode areas as at 1 April 2026. Accordingly, should Local Government Reorganisation take effect during the lifetime of the pilot or before the completion of the national evaluation, responsibility for administration, monitoring, reporting and carer engagement will transfer to the successor authority or authorities designated to assume Medway Council's children's services functions.
- 12.2. Eligible carers will continue to receive payments in accordance with the pilot arrangements, subject to the Department for Education funding and guidance. Feedback, complaints, evaluation activity and service-user consultation will be managed through the successor authority's arrangements to ensure continuity of participation in the national pilot and evaluation programme.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Diversity Impact Assessment (DIA)

Background papers

None