

Children's Services

ANNUAL FOSTERING REPORT 2025-2026

MEDWAY FOSTERING SERVICE



1. INTRODUCTION AND LEGAL CONTEXT

This report provides an overview of the performance, activity and development of Medway Fostering Service during the 2025–2026 financial year. It sets out the key areas of progress over the last 12 months, alongside the ongoing challenges and pressures faced by the service and outlines the priorities for the year ahead.

The fostering service operates within a complex and evolving national context. Across England, local authorities continue to experience a sustained shortage of foster carers, alongside increasing demand for placements and a growing complexity in the needs of children entering care. This national picture continues to impact locally, shaping both the opportunities and constraints within which Medway operates.

The national policy landscape for fostering and kinship care is undergoing significant reform. The Government has set out an ambitious programme to strengthen fostering, including a commitment to increase the number of foster carers nationally, alongside proposed changes to fostering regulations and the National Minimum Standards. These reforms are intended to improve sufficiency, strengthen support for carers and ensure that children have access to stable, high-quality placements.

Alongside this, there has been a growing national focus on the role of kinship care within the wider reform of children's services. Through the Families First agenda, kinship care is increasingly recognised as a central component in supporting children to remain within their family networks wherever it is safe and appropriate to do so. This includes plans to strengthen financial support, improve professional recognition of kinship carers and develop more consistent approaches across the country.

Medway has been well positioned within this evolving landscape. The authority has successfully secured participation in the national Kinship Allowance Pilot, which will introduce a non-means tested financial allowance for eligible kinship carers alongside wider system developments, including the implementation of Family Network Support Packages. These changes are intended to enable more children to remain safely within their family networks and to improve the stability and sustainability of these arrangements.

The scale and pace of these developments present both opportunities and challenges for the service. They require rapid local implementation, alongside continued focus on quality, compliance and outcomes. This report reflects how Medway is responding to this changing national context while continuing to develop its fostering and kinship offer.

Within this context, Medway Fostering Service has remained focused on strengthening its sufficiency, improving outcomes for children and ensuring that foster carers are well supported to provide stable and nurturing homes. The ongoing development of the service reflects a clear commitment to delivering high-quality local provision, underpinned by the principle of securing local homes for local children wherever possible.

The service continues to operate in accordance with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, the National Minimum Standards for Fostering (2011), and the Children Act 1989 and associated statutory guidance. Medway Fostering Service is registered with

Ofsted and remains subject to external regulation and inspection. Compliance with statutory requirements is monitored through robust quality assurance arrangements, including management oversight, fostering panel scrutiny and regular audit activity.

In addition to statutory compliance, the service is committed to a culture of continuous learning and improvement. Over the past year, this has included responding to feedback from foster carers and children, strengthening management oversight, and embedding changes following previous service redesign. The service has also continued to respond to external findings and sector developments, using these to inform its ongoing service plan.

This report should therefore be read not only as a summary of activity, but as a reflection of how the service is developing in response to both local need and the wider national fostering landscape.

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During 2025–2026, Medway Fostering Service has continued its programme of development and improvement while operating within an increasingly challenging external environment. The service has faced sustained pressures arising from national shortages of foster carers, growing demand for placements, and increasing complexity in the needs of children entering care. Against this backdrop, the service has made steady and measurable progress across a number of key areas.

One of the most significant developments over the past year has been the strengthening of the service's placement capacity. While sufficiency remains an ongoing challenge, there are early indicators that the position is beginning to stabilise. Increased recruitment activity has resulted in a growth in newly approved foster carers, and there is emerging evidence that the overall number of fostering households is no longer in decline. This represents an important shift following several years of reduction and provides a more stable foundation on which to build future sufficiency.

Alongside improvements in recruitment, there has been a notable increase in permanence planning activity. The number of permanent matches presented to fostering panel has significantly increased during the year, reflecting improved alignment between fostering services and permanence planning processes within the Corporate Parenting Service. This has supported more timely decision-making for children and has strengthened the service's ability to secure stable, long-term arrangements where this is in the child's best interests.

The expansion of the Mockingbird model has been a further area of progress. This approach has enhanced the support available to foster carers through structured peer networks, contributing to improved placement stability and helping to reduce the risk of carer burnout. Feedback from carers and children involved in the constellations has been consistently positive, and the model is now a central part of the service's retention strategy.

Improvements have also been made in governance and oversight. The introduction of a permanent Agency Decision Maker has strengthened decision-making processes and reduced delays, while the increasing volume and complexity of work presented to fostering panel has been managed effectively. The panel continues to provide robust challenge and

quality assurance, and there are positive indicators regarding the quality of assessments and decision-making.

Despite these improvements, several significant challenges remain. Placement sufficiency continues to be a key pressure, particularly for children with more complex needs, older children and sibling groups. Recruitment remains competitive, with continued pressure from independent fostering agencies and neighbouring authorities. In addition, while enquiry levels remain strong, the conversion rate from enquiry to approval continues to require improvement.

The complexity of children's needs is also increasing, placing additional demands on foster carers and the wider service. This reinforces the importance of continued investment in support, training and therapeutic approaches to ensure that placements remain stable and effective.

Overall, this has been a year of steady progress, with clear signs that the actions taken in previous periods are beginning to have a positive impact. The service is now in a stronger position, with improved infrastructure, greater workforce stability and a clearer strategic direction. However, continued focus will be required to build on this progress, particularly in relation to increasing capacity, improving recruitment outcomes, and ensuring that all children have access to high-quality, stable fostering placements.

3. FOSTERING SERVICE

3.1 Service Overview

Medway Fostering Service remains committed to ensuring that children and young people are cared for in safe, stable and nurturing family environments that promote their wellbeing and support their development. At the centre of the service is a clear focus on achieving the best possible outcomes for children, recognising the importance of stability, belonging and positive relationships in enabling children to thrive.

The service continues to operate as a reflective and learning-focused environment, where feedback from children, foster carers and partner agencies is used to inform ongoing improvement. There is a strong emphasis on accountability and responsiveness, with the service taking responsibility for addressing identified issues and strengthening practice where required. This includes responding to complaints, learning from safeguarding concerns, and embedding changes to improve consistency and quality.

In line with wider Children's Services priorities, the fostering service continues to promote a relationship-based approach to practice. Foster carers are recognised as key partners in delivering care, and the service seeks to ensure that they are supported, valued and equipped to meet the needs of children with increasingly complex experiences. This includes access to training, supervision and additional support, alongside a focus on developing a more trauma-informed and therapeutic model of care.

The service also continues to promote equality and diversity, ensuring that children's individual identities, including culture, religion, language and background, are recognised and

supported within their care placements. While this remains an ongoing area of development, there is a continued commitment to ensuring that the fostering population reflects, as far as possible, the diversity of the children in Medway.

3.2 Structure of the Service

The service structure introduced during the previous reporting period is now fully embedded and has provided a more stable and effective foundation for delivery. The fostering service sits within Provider Services and is overseen by the Head of Service, with operational leadership provided by a Service Manager and a team of Team Managers and Assistant Team Managers.

The service is organised across four core teams: the Fostering Recruitment and Assessment Team, two Fostering Support and Development Teams, and the Kinship and Post-Order Support Team. This structure reflects the full breadth of fostering activity, from attracting and assessing new carers, through to providing ongoing support and managing kinship and permanence-related work.

The embedding of this structure has strengthened the service's ability to respond to demand and has improved clarity in roles and responsibilities across teams. The addition of Assistant Team Manager posts has increased management capacity, allowing for more consistent supervision, stronger oversight of practice and improved decision-making. This has been particularly important in the context of increasing workload complexity and demand across the service.

The Recruitment and Assessment Team continues to focus on attracting and assessing prospective foster carers, as well as overseeing private fostering and supported homes arrangements. The Support and Development Teams provide ongoing supervision and support to foster carers, working to maintain placement stability and address challenges as they arise. The Kinship and Post-Order Support Team plays a critical role in responding to the increasing demand for family-based care, undertaking viability and connected person assessments and providing support following permanence orders.

Workforce stability, which was a significant challenge in previous years, has improved during this reporting period. While there continues to be some movement within the workforce, there is now greater continuity across teams and improved capacity at management level. This has contributed to more consistent practice, improved compliance and strengthened relationships with foster carers.

The strengthened management structure has had a tangible impact on the quality and consistency of practice across the service. Increased management capacity has enabled more regular and robust supervision, improved oversight of casework, and greater consistency in decision-making.

This has strengthened the service's ability to maintain statutory compliance, particularly in relation to visiting, supervision and foster carer reviews, and has improved the timeliness with which key decisions are progressed. Managers are now better placed to provide reflective

challenge, support social workers to manage increasingly complex situations, and ensure that risks are identified and responded to at an earlier stage.

The development of a more robust and visible management group has also improved accountability across the service. Social workers report clearer direction and support, and there is greater confidence from foster carers in the consistency and responsiveness of the service. While this remains an area of ongoing development, there is clear evidence that strengthened management oversight is contributing to improved practice and more stable outcomes for children.

Overall, the current structure provides a more resilient basis for service delivery. While demand and complexity continue to place pressure on the service, there is now greater confidence in its ability to respond effectively and to continue building on the improvements made over the past year.

3.3 Key Role Supporting Quality and Oversight

Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer

The Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer plays a vital role in safeguarding the welfare of children and young people. They assess the ongoing suitability of foster carers and their households, review terms of approval, attend panel meetings, and contribute to investigations involving allegations or concerns about standards of care. Their independent oversight ensures that the child's best interests remain the priority. Work is underway to explore the Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer's role in providing independent oversight of safeguarding and welfare arrangements within Supported Homes, including the suitability of hosts and their households, review of approval terms, and involvement in investigations concerning allegations or standards of support for young people aged 16+.

4. SERVICE ACTIVITY 2025–2026

4.1 Fostering Sufficiency and Placement Capacity

Fostering sufficiency continues to be one of the most significant challenges for the service, reflecting both local demand and the wider national shortage of foster carers. As of 31 March 2026, Medway had 81 approved fostering households, with 14 new approvals and 11 deregistrations during the reporting period.

While overall sufficiency remains under pressure, there are early indications that the service is beginning to stabilise following a number of years of decline. The increase in newly approved households represents a positive shift and reflects the impact of sustained recruitment activity, improvements in the recruitment approach and greater focus on progressing applicants through the assessment process.

Deregistrations during the year have reflected a range of factors. It is important to recognise that a proportion of carers have exited the service because of achieving permanence for children, including through Special Guardianship Orders and adoption. This represents

positive outcomes for children and should be considered within the broader context of permanence planning rather than solely as a reduction in fostering capacity.

The number of children placed with Medway foster carers at year end was 128 (out of a potential 216; there was 77 vacancies and 11 unavailable places). This reflects continued high levels of demand. Placement utilisation remains consistently high, and while there are approved places available, these are not always aligned with the needs of children requiring placement. This is particularly evident in relation to older children, sibling groups and children with more complex needs.

As a result, the service continues to experience challenges in matching, with some reliance on external placements where suitable in-house provision is not immediately available. This reinforces the importance of continuing to grow and diversify the local fostering offer to better meet the range of needs presented.

4.2 Matching Practice and Learning

Alongside work to strengthen placement capacity, the service has continued to develop its approach to matching. This has been informed by several internal learning exercises, including reviews of placements where outcomes have not been as intended. These reflections have identified the importance of more robust, well-informed and child-centred matching processes, particularly in the context of increasing complexity of need.

As a result, the service has introduced improvements in how matching decisions are made, including greater use of multi-agency information, stronger consideration of foster carer skills and capacity, and increased management oversight of placement decisions. There is now a clearer focus on achieving the right placement at the earliest stage, rather than managing risk once a placement is already in difficulty. A matching meeting takes place between the foster carer, social worker for the child and supervising social worker, chaired by a Team Manager, prior to any match being agreed. These are also taking place for planned respite arrangements also, as well as the completion of a document evidencing the matching consideration, which is placed on the child's file.

This work reflects the service's commitment to being a learning and evolving organisation. Where challenges arise, the service seeks to understand what has happened, identify areas for improvement and adapt practice accordingly. While this remains an area for ongoing development, there is early evidence that these changes are supporting more stable placements and reducing the likelihood of disruption.

4.3 Increased Scrutiny and Practice Assurance

During the latter part of the reporting period, the service saw an increase in referrals to the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) and Standards of Care (SOC) investigations. In Q4 there were 15 LADO consultations in relation to foster carers practice, compared to 1 in Q3, Q2 and Q1. While this represents a notable shift compared to earlier in the year, this is understood within the context of strengthened management oversight and increased scrutiny across the service.

With greater management capacity and more consistent supervision in place, there has been an increased focus on identifying and responding to concerns at an earlier stage. This has led to a higher level of professional curiosity and a more rigorous approach to reviewing foster carer practice. Where concerns have been identified, these have been appropriately escalated and managed through established safeguarding processes.

Encouragingly, this increase has begun to plateau, suggesting that the initial rise was linked to improved oversight rather than a sustained increase in issues. Taken together, this provides further assurance that the service is applying greater rigour to the assessment and ongoing review of care arrangements, ensuring that children's safety and wellbeing remain central to all placement decisions.

4.4 Recruitment Activity and Conversion

Recruitment remains a central focus for the service and continues to be influenced by a highly competitive national environment. Between April 2025 and March 2026, the fostering service received a total of 212 registrations of interest and enquiries from prospective foster carers. From these initial enquiries, 36 Initial Home Visits (IHVs) were completed, representing the first stage of assessing suitability and providing applicants with further information about fostering with the service.

Following the Initial Home Visit stage, 25 application packs were issued to prospective foster carers, with 18 formal applications subsequently received. This demonstrates continued engagement through the recruitment process, although some natural attrition occurred between stages. Following attendance at the Skills to Foster preparation training, four applicants chose to withdraw from the process, indicating that the training supported informed decision-making about the realities and responsibilities of fostering.

During the assessment process, safeguarding considerations resulted in seven assessments being ended during Stages 1 and 2, while one application was not approved by the fostering panel. In addition, the service received seven enquiries generated through existing foster carers, highlighting the value of current carers as ambassadors for fostering recruitment.

Overall, 14 foster carer households were approved during the reporting period. This represents a successful conversion of prospective applicants through a rigorous recruitment and assessment process designed to ensure that only suitable individuals are approved to care for vulnerable children and young people.

The current recruitment pipeline remains positive, with 12 families currently progressing through assessment and a further four families awaiting an Initial Home Visit. This suggests a continuing flow of prospective foster carers entering the service and provides confidence in future approval numbers.

Analysis of conversion rates demonstrates the progressive reduction in numbers expected throughout the fostering recruitment process. Of the 212 enquiries received, 36 progressed to an Initial Home Visit (17%). From these visits, 25 applicants moved on to receive an application pack (69%). Of those receiving a pack, 18 submitted a formal application (72%), and ultimately 14 applicants achieved approval (78% of applications received). These figures

reflect both the effectiveness of the recruitment process in identifying committed applicants and the robustness of assessment arrangements in ensuring high standards of foster carer approval.

While the above data demonstrates sustained interest, the progression from enquiry through to approval remains an area of ongoing challenge.

A number of factors contribute to this, including eligibility requirements, changes in applicant circumstances and the level of commitment required to complete the assessment process. In addition, the length of time taken to complete assessments continues to have an impact, with a proportion of applicants withdrawing before the process is concluded.

Despite this, there have been improvements during the year in progressing applicants through the system, resulting in an increase in approvals compared to previous years. The Recruitment and Assessment Team has continued to refine its processes, with a focus on early engagement, clearer communication and maintaining momentum throughout the assessment journey. The service is outward looking, keen to learning from the positive work of other local authorities in the region. As a result, we are trialling the use of Independent Social Workers undertaking Form F (Fostering) assessments. This is an innovation used in Wokingham who have successfully reduced their time from enquiry to approval to 5.4 months. The fastest in the region. Medway's average was 7 months. Whilst not an outlier, we are keen to try different innovations to improve our timeliness in assessment. The service has also started to begin assessment following the positive initial visit, rather than waiting for the completion of the Skills to Foster Course, as a review of our process revealed that once carers had a positive Initial Home Visit and completed their application form, the drop off was minimal, and by progressing to assessment at this stage the applicants could see movement in the process, they remained engaged and 'kept warm'.

The service has also continued to strengthen its marketing and outreach activity. This has included targeted digital campaigns, increased use of social media and engagement with local communities and events. Regional working through the Local Authority Fostering South East hub has provided additional support in raising the profile of fostering and generating enquiries, although conversion to approval remains a shared challenge across the region.

4.5 Retention and Support to Foster Carers

Retention of foster carers remains a priority, particularly within the context of national shortages and increasing complexity of need. The service continues to place a strong emphasis on ensuring that carers feel supported and valued, recognising the critical role they play in achieving positive outcomes for children.

During the year, there has been continued development of the support offer to foster carers. This includes more regular supervision, access to training, and opportunities for peer support. The expansion of the Mockingbird model has been particularly significant in this regard, providing carers with access to a supportive network and practical assistance during periods of challenge.

The service has also continued to develop its response to carers experiencing difficulties, including more proactive support where placements are at risk of disruption. There is an increasing recognition of the importance of early intervention and relationship-based support in maintaining placement stability and preventing breakdown. Work between the Fostering Service and Corporate Parenting has developed practice around holding stability meetings at the correct time and strengthening a multi-agency approach to maintaining children's homes with our carers.

Feedback from carers indicates that while challenges remain, there is improved confidence in the level of support provided by the service. This will remain an area of continued focus, particularly as the needs of children become more complex.

4.6 Fostering Panel and Quality Assurance

The Fostering Panel continues to play a central role in the governance and quality assurance of the service, providing independent scrutiny of assessments, reviews and permanence planning decisions.

During 2025–2026, the panel met on 24 occasions and considered a total of 119 cases. This represents an increase in activity compared to the previous year and reflects both growing demand and an increased volume of permanence-related work being brought to panel.

The number of permanent matches presented to Panel and approved by the Agency Decision Maker more than doubled during 2025/26, increasing from 22 children in 2024/25 to 47 children in 2025/26 (a 114% increase). This significant improvement reflects stronger partnership working between fostering services and the Corporate Parenting Service, leading to more effective and timely permanence arrangements for children. A key contributor has been the introduction of the 14+ matching process, through which 10 older children were considered during the year. As no equivalent process existed in the previous reporting period, this has enhanced opportunities for older children to achieve permanence and has supported a more flexible and responsive matching pathway.

The appointment of a permanent Agency Decision Maker during this period has also strengthened governance arrangements. This has improved the timeliness and consistency of decision-making and enabled more effective dialogue between the panel, service managers and decision-makers. As a result, delays have reduced and there is greater clarity in how decisions are reached and communicated.

Panel membership continues to reflect a broad range of skills and experience, including independent members, elected members and individuals with lived experience. Panels have remained quorate throughout the year, and annual appraisals and training continue to support the development and effectiveness of panel members.

The quality of work presented to panel remains generally strong, with positive feedback regarding the standard of assessments and the preparation of applicants and carers. There continues to be a focus on strengthening the consistent inclusion of the child's voice within panel processes. While progress has been made in this area, it remains an ongoing area for development across both fostering and children's social care.

Overall, the panel continues to provide effective oversight and constructive challenge, supporting safe and appropriate decision-making across the service.

4.7 Kinship and Post-Order Support

Demand within the Kinship and Post-Order Support Service remains high and continues to increase year on year. This reflects the growing emphasis on family-based care arrangements and the expectation that connected carers are considered wherever possible for children who are unable to remain with their parents.

During the reporting period, the service received 218 requests for viability assessments and completed 112 assessments (NB: the Assessments figure is based on the Request date, not the Assessment date; i.e. if the request came in on 31 March, we'd count the Assessment even if it was completed a week later). These figures reflect a sustained increase in demand over recent years and highlight the pressure placed on the service to respond quickly to court timescales and placement needs. Delays in notification of court direction, and timescales for assessments which are squeezed by the courts create pressures on the team, particularly when unavoidable delays in DBS and Medical checks are impacting on the ability of the Kinship Team in being able to finalise assessments.

In addition to assessment activity, the service continues to support a significant number of Special Guardianship Order (SGO) families, currently 206, caring for more than 286 children. This area of work is becoming increasingly complex, with many families requiring ongoing support to manage the impact of trauma, loss and change.

The expansion of the Kinship Team following the restructure that took effect on 01.04.26 has improved the service's ability to respond to demand, although pressures remain, however, to keep pace with the demands on the local authority business cases have been agreed to maintain two additional locums over and above the establishment. The diverse nature of the team's work, which includes viability assessments, connected person approvals, special guardianship assessments and post-order support, requires flexibility and resilience. The service continues to provide a range of support to kinship carers, including access to training, support groups and therapeutic interventions through the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund. This support is essential in maintaining stability within placements and reducing the risk of breakdown.

The increasing demand within this area highlights both the strengths and challenges of a system that prioritises family-based care. While outcomes for children are often improved through remaining within their wider family network, this approach requires sustained investment in assessment capacity and post-order support to ensure placements remain stable and effective.

A significant development during the latter part of the reporting period has been Medway's successful inclusion in the national 'Kinship Zones' Kinship Allowance Pilot and wider Kinship Programme. Medway applied to be part of this programme in July 2025 and was notified of its inclusion in February 2026. This represents a major achievement for the service and

reflects the strength of Medway's existing kinship offer and practice. Medway is one of only 7 Local Authorities in England to be selected on merit,

The pilot introduces a non-means tested financial allowance for eligible kinship carers, providing greater financial stability and recognition of the critical role that these carers play in caring for some of the most vulnerable children. In Medway, approximately 206 families are currently being financially supported through Special Guardianship arrangements, all of whom are expected to benefit from the pilot over its duration, which is due to run until 2029.

This development is expected to have a significant positive impact on both carers and children. For carers, the introduction of a consistent, non-means tested allowance reduces financial uncertainty and pressure, enabling them to focus on providing stable and nurturing care. For children, this increased stability within kinship placements supports improved emotional wellbeing, continuity of care and stronger long-term outcomes.

The inclusion in the pilot has required the service to respond at pace. Following notification in February 2026, work has been undertaken to rapidly operationalise the model, including developing processes, engaging with carers and establishing the infrastructure required to administer payments and monitor impact. As part of this, the service has begun recruitment of a dedicated project team to manage the delivery of the pilot and support the national evaluation for the duration of the pilot which is set to benefit Medway Children and Families until 2029.

Participation in the Kinship Pilot places Medway at the forefront of national developments in kinship care. It provides a significant opportunity not only to enhance support for existing carers, but also to contribute to shaping future policy and practice through the learning generated over the course of the programme.

4.8 Key Service Developments

Mockingbird Programme

The Mockingbird programme has continued to expand during 2025–2026 and is now a well-established element of Medway's fostering offer. The service currently operates three constellations, supporting 21 fostering households and 33 children and young people.

The model has significantly enhanced the support available to foster carers by creating structured peer networks, reducing isolation and providing practical and emotional support. Feedback from carers consistently highlights the value of being part of a constellation, particularly during challenging periods. The model has also supported foster carers to build stronger relationships with one another, contributing to a sense of shared responsibility and community.

There is emerging evidence that the Mockingbird model is having a positive impact on placement stability, with support from hub carers and the wider constellation helping to prevent placement disruption and reduce the risk of carer burnout. The involvement of partner agencies within the Mockingbird steering group has further strengthened the support offer, providing carers with more direct access to specialist advice and services.

Mockingbird Constellation 4 has been launched. Constellation 5 is planned to launch in Q3 26/27 with Constellation 6 in Q1 27/28. In line with national policy direction, Expansion of the model will continue to be a priority, although there are challenges in recruiting the necessary liaison roles to support further growth. Work is ongoing to promote understanding of the model across the service and to encourage wider participation.

Supported Homes

Supported Homes provision continues to develop as part of the wider placement sufficiency strategy. This provision supports young people aged 16 and over, providing a safe and supportive environment in which they can develop independence skills while maintaining appropriate levels of care.

During the reporting period, there were 17 approved providers, with additional applicants progressing through assessment. While this remains a relatively small area of the overall service, it plays an important role in offering a flexible alternative to traditional foster care for young people (16+).

Private Fostering

During 2025/26, there was a small increase in the number of Private Fostering notifications compared with previous years, although overall activity remains broadly consistent with the levels seen in 2023/24 and 2024/25. This continued level of notification is encouraging and is believed to reflect the positive impact of ongoing awareness-raising activity and a wider understanding of Private Fostering arrangements across partner agencies, including schools, as well as within Children's Services. At the start of the reporting period, there were 8 Private Fostering arrangements already in place on 1 April 2025. During the year, the service received 30 new notifications, while 7 notifications were closed. As of 31 March 2026, 6 Private Fostering arrangements remained active and continuing, demonstrating the service's ongoing role in identifying, assessing and monitoring arrangements to ensure that privately fostered children are safeguarded and their welfare promoted.

Compliance with statutory visiting requirements remains strong, with all children seen within required timescales. The service continues to prioritise safeguarding and oversight, ensuring that privately fostered children are supported and that their welfare is promoted effectively.

5. CHALLENGES AND RISKS

While the service has made steady progress during 2025–2026, it continues to operate within a context of significant and sustained challenge. These pressures are both local and national in nature and require a continued strategic focus to ensure that the service can meet the needs of children effectively.

Placement sufficiency remains the most significant challenge. Despite improvements in recruitment and early signs of stabilisation, the number of available in-house foster carers is not yet sufficient to meet current demand. This is particularly evident in relation to older children, sibling groups and those with more complex needs, where suitable placements can

be difficult to identify. As a result, there continues to be some reliance on external provision, which can impact both placement stability and cost.

Recruitment and conversion continue to present challenges. While there is ongoing interest in fostering and enquiry levels remain consistent, the progression from enquiry to approval is not yet at the level required to significantly increase capacity. This reflects a combination of factors, including the expectations of the role, changes in applicant circumstances and the competitiveness of the fostering market.

The increasing complexity of children's needs is also a key pressure. Many children entering care have experienced trauma, instability and loss, requiring carers who are able to provide highly skilled and consistent support. This places additional demands on foster carers and increases the importance of ensuring that they are well supported, trained and able to access specialist input where required.

Workforce pressures, while improved, remain an area of continued focus. The service has seen greater stability during the year; however, recruitment to some specialist roles, including those required to support service developments such as Mockingbird, remains challenging. Maintaining sufficient capacity across all teams is essential to ensuring consistent and timely service delivery.

Alongside these operational challenges, the service has continued to respond to a programme of significant national reform within children's social care and fostering. Throughout 2025/26, a number of government-led initiatives have been announced and implemented to demanding timescales, requiring rapid service mobilisation and adaptation. These have included the implementation of the Kinship Care Pilot, the development and introduction of Family Network Support Packages, and preparations for the national move towards regional recruitment and assessment arrangements for foster carers through Regional Care Co-operatives. In addition, the service has been preparing for wider changes to fostering regulation, National Minimum Standards and associated practice requirements. Collectively, these reforms represent some of the most significant changes to fostering and family support services in recent years and continue to shape the way services are designed and delivered.

A notable feature of this work has been the service's ability to respond positively to these developments without the provision of additional staffing resources. The design and implementation of new approaches have been achieved through the commitment and flexibility of the existing workforce, supported by strong collaborative working across Children's Services and corporate colleagues, including Communications, Digital and Systems Services. This has enabled Medway to meet challenging implementation timescales whilst maintaining business-as-usual activity and continuing to deliver support to children, carers and families.

Whilst the long-term impact of these reforms will become clearer over the coming years, it is evident that fostering services are operating in an increasingly complex and evolving policy environment. The service remains committed to embracing innovation, responding to national

expectations and ensuring that children and families continue to receive high-quality support throughout this period of change.

Finally, Medway continues to operate within a highly competitive fostering market. Independent fostering agencies and neighbouring authorities continue to actively recruit within the same geographical area, often promoting differing financial and support offers. This creates an ongoing challenge in attracting and retaining foster carers within the in-house service.

These challenges are not unique to Medway but reflect broader national trends. However, addressing them remains critical to ensuring that the service can continue to provide high-quality, stable placements for children.

6. SERVICE DEVELOPMENT AND PRIORITIES 2026–2027

Building on the progress made during 2025–2026, the service has identified a number of key priorities for the coming year, focused on increasing placement sufficiency, supporting carers and improving outcomes for children.

A primary focus will be increasing the number of in-house foster carers through strengthened recruitment activity, improved conversion of enquiries to approvals and more timely assessments. The recent revision to foster carer eligibility criteria, which enables applicants to combine fostering with employment where appropriate, will support efforts to broaden the pool of prospective carers. The service aims to increase approved fostering households by 10% during 2026–2027, with a particular focus on carers for teenagers, sibling groups and children with additional needs.

Retaining and developing existing carers will remain a priority. The service will continue to expand the Mockingbird model, strengthen peer support networks and enhance access to training and therapeutic support, with the aim of improving placement stability and foster carer retention.

Improving permanence outcomes for children will continue to be a key objective. Building on the increase in permanent matching activity during 2025–2026, the service will seek to increase the number of children achieving long-term fostering arrangements while reducing placement disruptions and unplanned endings.

Within the Kinship Service, priorities include maintaining timely assessments, embedding Family Network Support Packages and strengthening post-order support. The service will aim to increase the number of kinship families accessing ongoing support and interventions designed to sustain family-based care.

The service will also continue to develop local Supported Homes provision, reducing reliance on external placements and enabling more children and young people to remain within Medway where this is in their best interests.

Finally, the service will maintain a strong focus on quality assurance, regulatory compliance and preparation for forthcoming national reforms, including Regional Care Co-operatives, changes to fostering regulations and updates to National Minimum Standards. Through these

priorities, the service will continue to adapt to a changing national landscape whilst delivering high-quality support to children, carers and families.

6. CONCLUSIONS

During 2025–2026, Medway Fostering Service has made meaningful and measurable progress across a number of key areas. Improvements in recruitment outcomes, permanence planning and service infrastructure demonstrate that the changes implemented in recent years are beginning to have a positive impact.

At the same time, the service continues to operate within a challenging and complex environment. Placement sufficiency, recruitment pressures and the increasing needs of children remain significant factors influencing service delivery. These challenges require ongoing attention and a sustained strategic response.

There are, however, clear indications that the service is moving in the right direction. Greater workforce stability strengthened governance arrangements, and the expansion of initiatives such as Mockingbird are contributing to a more resilient and effective service.

The focus moving forward will be on building on this progress, particularly in increasing fostering capacity, strengthening support for carers and ensuring that all children have access to safe, stable and nurturing placements. The service remains committed to continuous improvement and to delivering the best possible outcomes for children and young people in Medway.

Signed: Date:

(Head of Service, Provider Services)

Signed: Date:

(Assistant Director, Children's Services)

Signed: Date:

(Portfolio Holder for Children's Services - Lead Member)

