

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

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Annual Fostering Report 2025–2026

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Summary

This report presents the Annual Fostering Report for 2025–2026 and provides Cabinet with an overview of the performance, activity, achievements and challenges of Medway Fostering Service during the reporting period. The report outlines progress made in strengthening fostering sufficiency, improving permanence planning, supporting foster carers, and responding to increasing demand for kinship care services.

The report highlights positive developments including increased foster carer approvals, improvements in permanence planning, expansion of Mockingbird Constellations, strengthened governance arrangements, and Medway's successful inclusion as one of seven national Department for Education Kinship Allowance Pilot authorities. It also identifies the ongoing challenges relating to placement sufficiency, recruitment and retention of foster carers, and increasing complexity of children's needs.

This report in addition, presents the Annual Private Fostering Report for 2025–2026, that outlines the safeguarding role of the fostering service fulfilling its statutory responsibilities in relation to Private Fostering arrangements.

1. Recommendation

- 1.1 The Committee is asked to note the contents of the Annual Fostering Report 2025–2026 and the Annual Private Fostering Report for 2025–2026 attached at Appendices 1 and 2, respectively.

2. Budget and policy framework

- 2.1 The report supports the delivery of the Council Plan's priority of ensuring children and young people achieve their potential through the provision of safe, stable, and nurturing family-based care. The report also contributes to the Council's Corporate Parenting responsibilities by demonstrating how

fostering and kinship services support positive outcomes for children in care and care experienced young people.

3. Background

- 3.1 Medway Council is required under the Children Act 1989, the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services to maintain a fostering service and monitor its effectiveness and quality.
- 3.2 The production of an annual fostering report and annual private fostering reports form part of the Council's governance and quality assurance arrangements.
- 3.3 The annual report provides a comprehensive overview of fostering service activity during 2025–2026. It reports on recruitment and retention activity, fostering sufficiency, placement capacity, fostering panel activity, support for carers, quality assurance arrangements, kinship services, and key service developments including the expansion of the Mockingbird programme.
- 3.4 The report identifies that recruitment activity remained strong, with 212 enquiries received during the year and 14 newly approved fostering households. On 31 March 2026, Medway had 81 approved fostering households supporting 128 children and young people. Whilst there are indications that fostering capacity is stabilising, local and national placement sufficiency challenges continue to impact on the availability of placements, particularly for older children, sibling groups, and children with complex needs.
- 3.5 The report also highlights significant growth in kinship activity, with 112 viability assessments completed during the year and approximately 206 Special Guardianship families receiving support from the service; this relates to 286 children. Medway's successful inclusion within the national Kinship Allowance Pilot represents a significant opportunity to improve outcomes and support for kinship carers and children.
- 3.6 The fostering service also continued to fulfil its statutory responsibilities in relation to Private Fostering arrangements. During 2025/26, the service received 30 notifications of potential Private Fostering arrangements and maintained strong compliance with statutory visiting requirements, ensuring that all children were seen within required timescales and no disqualifications, prohibitions or safeguarding failures identified during the reporting period. Statutory compliance remained strong, with all required visits completed within timescales Robust management oversight, supervision and audit arrangements continue to provide assurance that children living in private fostering arrangements are safeguarded and supported. The service continued to promote awareness through engagement with schools, partner agencies, community organisations, and targeted campaigns across Medway.

4. Advice and analysis

- 4.1 The Annual Fostering Report demonstrates that Medway Fostering Service has made measurable progress during 2025–2026 despite operating in a challenging national environment.
- 4.2 Recruitment and assessment activity has resulted in an increase in foster carer approvals and a positive pipeline of prospective carers progressing through the assessment process. Improvements in permanence planning have led to a significant increase in permanent matches for children, whilst the expansion of Mockingbird support has strengthened placement stability and foster carer resilience. Governance arrangements have also been strengthened through the appointment of a permanent Agency Decision Maker and continued effective operation of the fostering panel.
- 4.3 Demand pressures remain significant, particularly in relation to placement sufficiency and kinship services. However, the service has demonstrated its ability to respond positively to these pressures while implementing significant national reforms. The inclusion of Medway in the national Kinship Allowance Pilot represents a major opportunity to strengthen practice and support available to kinship carers and improve outcomes for children cared for within family networks. The Kinship Allowance Pilot offset pot has facilitated the establishment of Family Network Meetings and Family Network Packages to support parents, kinship networks and wider support to retain and stabilise children in their network care, transitions from statutory care to kinship care, and to mitigate escalation to child protection.
- 4.4 No Diversity Impact Assessment is required as the report is for information and does not propose a change in policy or service provision. However, the fostering service continues to promote equality, diversity and inclusion through recruitment activity, matching arrangements and support to children and carers from diverse backgrounds.
- 4.5 The report also highlights good performance in relation to Private Fostering arrangements. During the year, the service maintained 100% compliance with statutory visiting requirements and completed all suitability assessments and reviews within required timescales. Increased notifications from Children's Services and Education partners indicate that awareness-raising activity is having a positive impact on professional understanding and identification of potentially vulnerable children.
- 4.6 The service continued to deliver its statutory Private Fostering responsibilities, receiving 30 notifications during the year and maintaining 100% compliance with statutory visiting requirements. Awareness raising activity across schools, community organisations and partner agencies contributed to improved identification and safeguarding oversight of privately fostered children.

5. Risk management

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Placement sufficiency	Insufficient local fostering placements leading to increased reliance on external provision and reduced placement choice for children.	Continued investment in recruitment, retention initiatives, Mockingbird expansion, and placement sufficiency planning.	B2
Recruitment and retention	Difficulty attracting and retaining foster carers in a competitive marketplace.	Enhanced marketing activity, improved support offer, training, peer support, and carer retention initiatives.	B2
Increasing complexity of need	Children's needs becoming increasingly complex, impacting placement stability and support requirements.	Continued therapeutic support, training, and development for carers and strengthened matching arrangements.	B2
National reform programme	Significant policy and legislative reforms place additional demand on the service.	Planned implementation programmes, project oversight and ongoing workforce development.	C2
Identification of Private Fostering Arrangements	Failure to identify private fostering arrangements could result in children remaining unsupported and unassessed, increasing safeguarding risks.	Continue awareness raising across schools, health services, community organisations, and Children's Services. Maintain training and monitoring arrangements to promote timely notifications.	C4

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

6. Consultation

- 6.1 The report has been informed by performance information, quality assurance activity, fostering panel feedback, foster carer feedback, service user experience and engagement with partner agencies throughout the reporting period.
- 6.2 In relation to Private Fostering, awareness and consultation activity continued throughout the year with schools, Designated Safeguarding Leads, faith groups, community organisations, and health partners, supporting improved identification and safeguarding of privately fostered children.
- 6.3 The report will be considered by the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee prior to Cabinet consideration.

7. Climate change implications

- 7.1 There are no direct climate change implications arising from this report.

8. Financial implications

- 8.1 Failure to secure sufficient in-house fostering placements will continue the increased reliance on independent fostering agencies and other external placements, creating additional pressure on an already overspent Children's Services placement budget.
- 8.2 At the time of writing there are 83 active inhouse foster placements at an average cost of £603 per week compared to the budgeted 93 placements at an average of £560 per week. The 2026/27 round one monitoring forecast, predicts an overspend of c£290,000 on the inhouse fostering placement budget by the end of the financial year.
- 8.3 Continued investment in recruitment, retention, and support initiatives for foster carers contributes to reducing reliance on higher-cost external placements and supports improved outcomes for children and young people.
- 8.4 There are no financial implications in relation to Private Fostering; however, these kinship care arrangements are eligible where appropriately identified via Family Network Meetings, to access Family Network Support Packages to unlock barriers to stabilising care with time limited support.

9. Legal implications

- 9.1 Medway Fostering Service operates in accordance with the Children Act 1989, the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services.
- 9.2 The Council has a statutory responsibility to maintain a fostering service and monitor its effectiveness and quality. The Annual Fostering Report supports

compliance with these responsibilities and provides assurance regarding the operation and performance of the service.

9.3 The Council also has specific duties under the Children Act 1989 and the National Minimum Standards for Private Fostering to safeguard and promote the welfare of privately fostered children and to undertake awareness-raising activity to support identification of private fostering arrangements. The annual report demonstrates compliance with these responsibilities.

9.4 There are no direct legal implications arising from noting this report.

Lead Officer Contact

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Annual Fostering Report 2025–2026

Appendix 2: Annual Private Fostering Report 2025–2026

Background papers

None