

Children's Services

ANNUAL INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICERS (IRO) REPORT

MEDWAY IRO SERVICE

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Date	24.7.26

1. SUMMARY

- The purpose of this report is to provide an account of the IRO service activity for the period 1st April 2025 to 31st March 2026, to consider the profile of the Local Authority cohort of children cared for, and trends and themes in how the Local Authority has discharged their duties for these children.
- The IRO role is set within statutory framework of the IRO Handbook (2010), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-reviewing-officers-handbook> linked to the revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance, established in the Children and Young People's Act 2008, introduced in April 2011.
- The IRO has a key independent role in relation to the promotion and quality of care planning for Children in Care, and for challenging drift and delay in children's care and permanence plans. The service is an independent one, regulated through statute, to effectively provide this challenge, sited in the Local Authority. The IRO Handbook (2010) updated yearly, established the need for annual formal reporting from the service to Local Authorities too, and is a published report on the council's website. The Independent Reviewing Officer (herein referred to as the IRO) post is a statutory one, supported by this legislation.
- IROs build relationships with children, young people, and their professional and family networks to ensure effective decision making and care planning by the Local Authority and its partners, to establish the most positive outcomes for children the Local Authority care for.
- The Handbook sets out the statutory requirement for an IRO service to produce an annual report and the legal context and the purpose of the service. In brief the functions and requirements of the IRO and the service are:
- That all children being cared for should have an IRO who should remain a consistent figure in their (and if also in care, their siblings' lives), during their journey through care who they see at their reviews, in between them and who they know how to contact.
- That the IRO will chair (or help the child to chair) their Child in Care Review meetings (within twenty working days of them entering care, within 3 months after, and every 6 months thereafter).
- The promotion of the voice of the child or young person being cared for in their care plan, to include their views about their permanence options, and their day-to-day care arrangements.
- To ensure that plans made by the Local Authority for children they care for are based on current, detailed, and informed assessments, identifying their needs and effective interventions and services.

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- To meet and consult with children and young people cared for, about their review meetings and their care plan, enabling them to authentically contribute and ensure that they understand the implications of any changes and how to access an advocate to help them. That they can make a formal complaint and seek their own legal advice regarding their care plans and how the Local Authority is discharging their duties.
 - To identify, and when necessary, take action to prevent any unnecessary delay in care and permanence planning for children and the delivery of services to them; provide challenge and support to social workers, managers, and senior managers to ensure these are timely. To act to improve the daily needs of children from those who are caring for them.
 - To hold an overview of the Local Authority's performance, as a corporate parent, and report on themes, trends, and any gaps in their duties to children they care for.
 - To use an effective means of challenging the Local Authority including, a Dispute Resolution Procedure, with a right once these are exhausted, to convey concerns to CAFCASS, and to access their own independent legal advice. This includes powers to ask the Local Authority to suspend any planned moves for children, where there are disputes.
 - The IRO service in Medway is well-established and supports Medway in providing good outcomes for children and young people who are cared for. The service takes a collaborative approach, understanding that the role and functions of the IRO contribute to achieving good outcomes for children. The IRO service provides high support and challenge to the Local Authority in respect of its corporate parenting and safeguarding duties towards children and young people they care for and in identifying any gaps in the Local Authorities services for this cohort.

2. IRO SERVICE

The IRO service is made up of 8.6 IROs. The Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer (FIRO 1x F/T post) is managed in the Service and provides extra IRO capacity for up to 12 additional children. During this year no permanent IROs left the service. The 0.6 post is currently covered by an agency worker until such a time as more capacity may need to be agreed to plan for more work being planned (see below). IROs are qualified, experienced social workers, many of whom have been previously employed in a management role; their role is commensurate with a Team Manager role in children's social care.

The IRO group enjoys diverse representation regarding ethnicity and gender. The service has remained stable despite some challenges seen across the wider southeast region, and being a separate service ahead of the children's care reforms has helped.

This year the IRO service continued to perform well. All children's statutory review meetings, except one, were held within timescales and children continued to be allocated a named IRO within 72 hours of the service being notified they had entered care. Children and young people were routinely able to contribute their views to their reviews, with maintained high participation and attendance at review meetings taking place above the local targets. The service continued to help children and young people to chair their meetings for child led participation and chairing opportunities. IRO's further developed their links with services to support social workers and teams. The Learning and Accountability notifications (formally Dispute Resolution and Escalations) has continued to work successfully this year to address some difficult care planning issues for some children.

Children still receive a personalised account of their review meeting, from their IROs, in the form of a letter, which explains their care plan, comments on the care they are being offered, noting resulting actions and timescales. These letters are written compassionately and using accessible language and the preferred terms of children. Children continue to experience this personalised letter as meaningful. This style of recording is now being adopted in services and in file recordings for children by the whole workforce.

3. CHILDREN IN CARE, DATA AND TRENDS

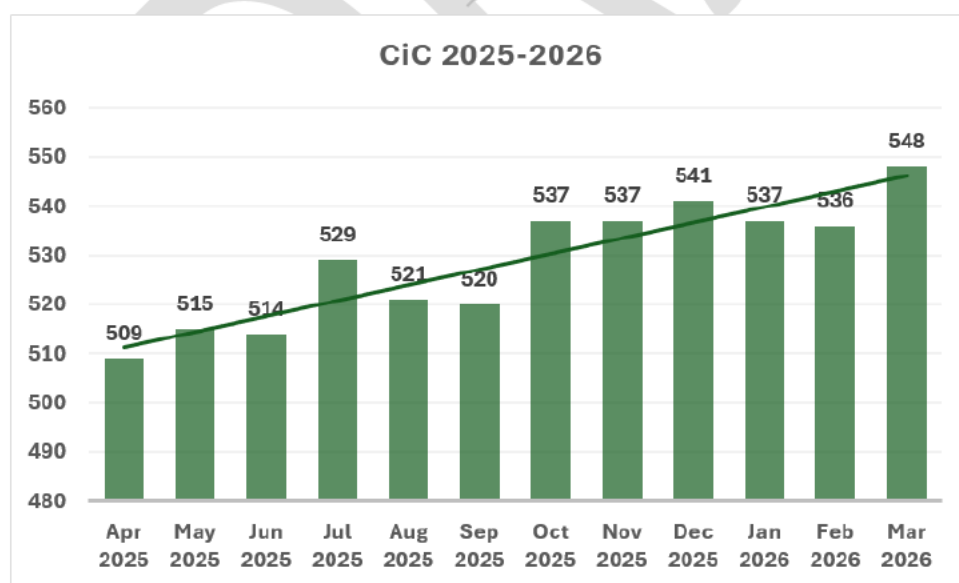
For the purposes of reporting children are counted per care episode during the course of the year, so any child entering care more than once will be counted more than once.

Main trends:

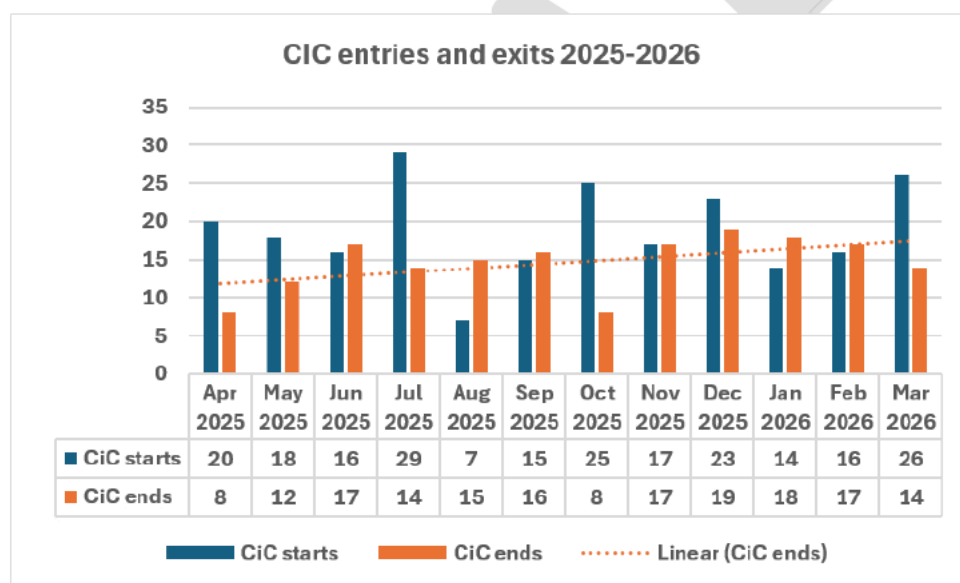
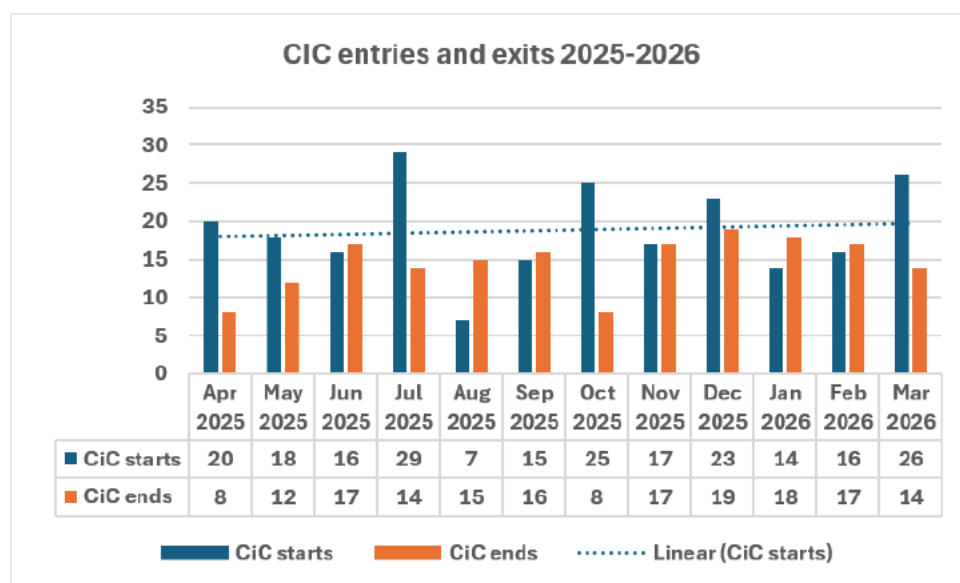
- 299 Care Orders were in place for children at the start of the year and at the end of the year 310, in line with last year's rates trending upwards.
- ICOs stood at 108 at the start of the year and higher at 129 at the end, showing higher numbers than last year; trending upwards and not downwards.
- 27 children were subject to Placement Orders (with a plan for adoption) at the start of the year with 29 at the end of the year; 15 children were adopted this year, a slight increase.
- 55 children entered care through police protection throughout the year: some could have avoided care if joint working with the police around their decisions about bail conditions had been reviewed sooner by senior police.
- Children accommodated voluntarily, through use of S20s, which included unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, stood at 67 at the start of the year and 80 at the end, an increase from last year.
- IRO caseloads remained stable throughout the year with the average caseload sitting at approximately over 60 cases and within the recommended levels, but some increase from last year, in line with increased children entering care.
- 163/493 or 33% of children were placed over 20 miles away from Medway having increased from 28% to 31% in the last 2 years. Children being placed further away impacts on IRO's travelling time.

- A greater number of boys were cared for during the year; in April 2025, this equated to 303/509 or 59% of the cohort with 206/509 or 41% being girls. By March 2026, this was 314/548 or 57% of boys and 234/548 or 43% of girls.
- There was no reporting for children who classify themselves as non-binary.
- By March 2026, the largest age group in care, were those aged 10–15 years at 211/548 or 38.5% (an increase from last year's 198), 16–17-year-olds sat at 137/548 or 25% (a decrease from 185 last year); combined older children (10-17years represented 348/548 or 63% of the cohort a decrease from 81% last year. Children aged 5 to 9 years sat at 99 (an increase from 83 at the end of last year) and children aged 0-4 at 76 (lower than 84 last year) and babies at 25. Children aged 0-9 then accounted for 200/548 or 37% of the whole cohort. This represented some shift towards younger children this year, with older children remaining a focus still.
- 226 children entered care this year an increase from last year's 155, reversing last year's decrease. 175 children left care this year increasing the numbers of children in care overall.
- Most children left care by turning 18 years of age or by returning to live with their parents, family members, connected persons at the conclusion of care proceedings (157/175 or 90%).
- No disabled children offered a short break arrangement were considered under S20 arrangements, requiring reg 48 IRO oversight, (care planning regulations 2010) this year.

The below table illustrates the overall total of children in care, trending upwards.

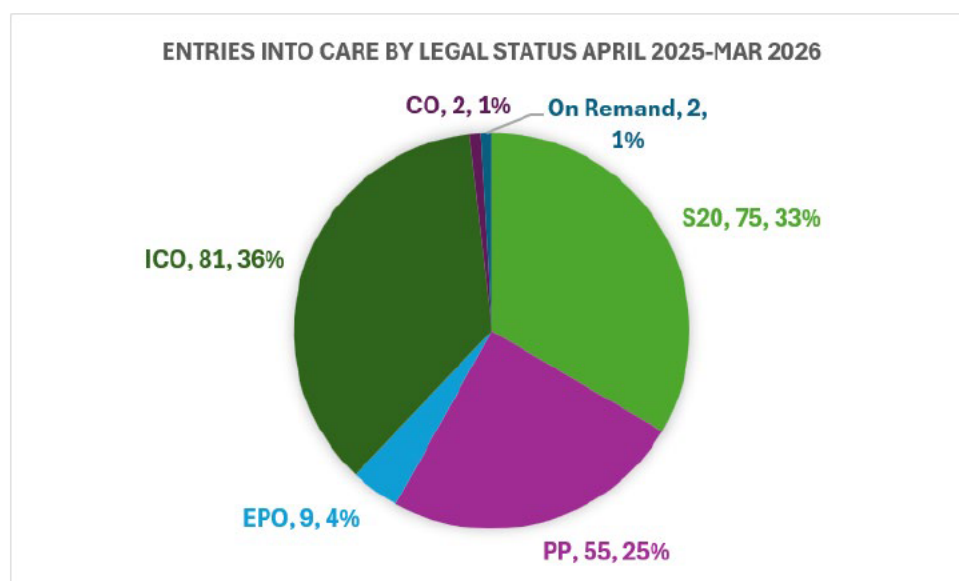


The above 2 tables illustrate the upward trends over the last year of children entering and leaving care.



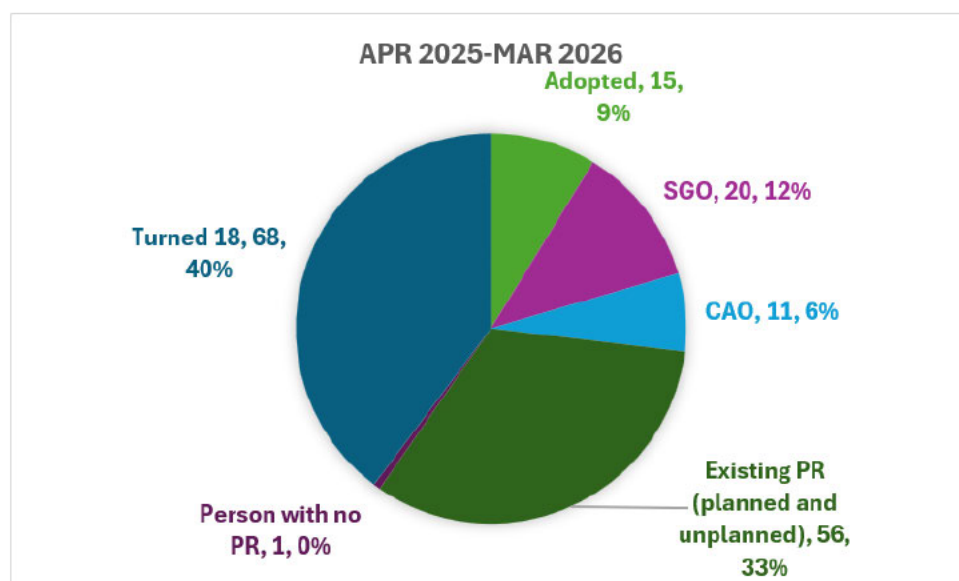
In Medway, the rate of children in care in April 2025 was 73.9% per 10,000 and at the year-end in March 2026 sat at 80% per 10,000. Medway remained higher than the national level rates and statistical neighbours like last year

The below table represents the legal basis of children entering care during 2025-2026.



The main reason children entered care last year was because of the Local Authority applying for care proceedings and being awarded Interim Care Orders or a Care Order (37%); a change from last year's S20 accommodations (at 44%), which sat at 33% this year. The percentage rate of ICO remained similar to last year. S20 entries, like last year, included unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Police Protections this year were at 25% as opposed to 12.9% last year; likely due to improved recording and recognition by the social work teams of police protection being an entry into care, with the IRO service, supporting this at the point of an IRO allocation. A few young people entered care having been criminally remanded into Medway's care, either into the secure criminal estate (e.g. to Youth Offending Institutions or Secure Training Centres) or were remanded to Local Authority Accommodation, after being refused bail. A few children entered care at the conclusion of care proceedings (a similar rate to the last 2 years).

The below table represents the reasons children left care 2025-226



Like last year, the main reasons children left care this year were when they **turned 18 years** of age and when **they remained with or returned to their parents** usually after care proceedings concluded. Child Arrangement Orders, Special Guardianship Orders, usually represented family members who were assessed as alternative carers to parents, meaning that **most children remained in a strengthened family care arrangement representing 56% of the cohort**. Like last year, it would be useful for Medway to continue to strengthen work in pre-proceedings, in CiN and Child Protection planning, to ensure that the right services and interventions are received by children and their families, at the earliest points, potentially enabling less children to enter care through interim care orders and care proceedings.

Medway's fostering service was notified of its inclusion in February 2026, to become a part of the national Kinship Allowance Pilot and wider Kinship Programme. Consultation with the IRO service about how Special Guardian and Child Arrangement Orders will be financially strengthened (as an outcome of care proceedings) took place with IROs reminding family members about these allowances when potential carers are considering these.

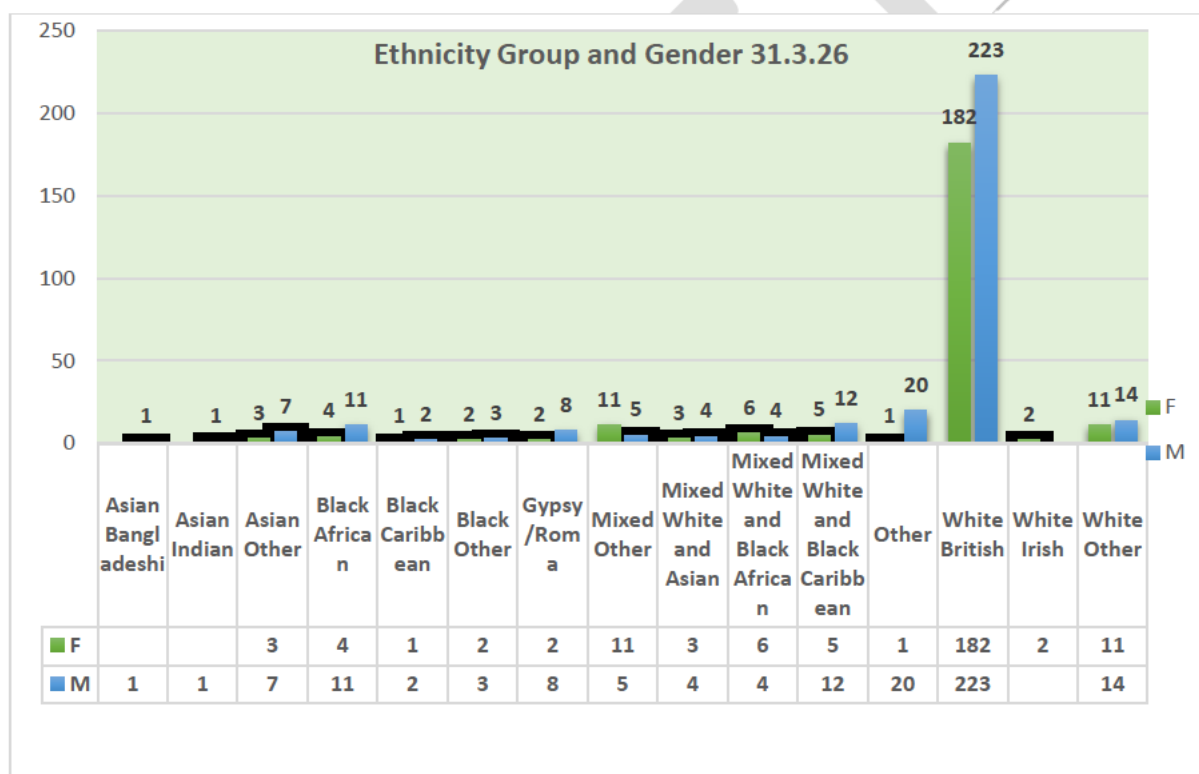
The planned introduction of Multi Agency Child Protection Teams and Lead Child Protection Practitioners no later than March 2027, across all Local Authority children's services, (strengthening a single assessment model for family support, increased family involvement at an earlier stage, increased support through family network support packages) and with the improved Kinship Local Offer, work to strengthen families should see in time a reduction of children entering care.

Last year 68 children left care at the age of 18 years, which included a few unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people age assessed as over the age of 18 who were collected by the home office, a few remained with their parents in line with their plans, some remained with foster carers under 'Staying Put' arrangements, a few children transferred to adult services

in line with their significant care needs. The rest of the 18-year-olds remained in appropriate accommodation with varying levels of support until their housing options were finalised.

This year 15 children left care because of being adopted, a slight increase from last year. 31 children had Agency Decision maker (ADM) decisions for adoption this year, an increase from 28 last year, 17 Placement Orders were granted, fewer than 25 last year, 21 matches were approved from 14 the year before, 20 children were placed for adoption an increase from 14 last year. The number of days from Placement Orders to matching of children was quicker at 170 days than 237 nationally and the days until an Adoption Order was granted, stood at 191 against the national average of 244, evidencing where plans for adoption were made and progressed the experience of Medway's children was better than the national average and took less time.

The below table shows the ethnicity of Medway's children in care at the end of this year.



Children of Asian/Chinese/Mixed White and Asian heritage accounted for 19/548 or 3.4% of children in care, a small decrease from last year's 4.2%. Children of Black African/Black Caribbean/Mixed White and Black African/Mixed White and Black Caribbean/Black other accounted for 50/548 or 9.1% a small increase from 8.5% last year. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children represented 41/548 or 7.4% a small decrease from 8.1% from the previous year; some of these children, were recorded as from 'other ethnic group' seen as 'other' representing those of Arab heritage (mainly from Afghanistan). Of the above groups the

overall number of children with an ethnicity which was not considered white British, Irish or 'White Other', represented 116/548 or 19.9% similar to last year and the year before.

4. PRACTICE IMPROVEMENT- THEMES

Like last year Medway's use of **unregistered and unregulated care arrangements** for older children has remained low and by March 2026, 1 16-year-old was placed in an unregulated children's home. There was greater focus this year on identifying, reporting and monitoring 10 children (at the end of the year) in unregulated care arrangements; reasons for their unregulated status were for a variety of reasons. All children had defensive decisions about why these care arrangements were best for them updated every 3 months. IROs continued to visit these children, attended weekly network meetings and provided weekly oversight for these children. Oversight of children's care, in Children's' homes where there is a below Ofsted judgement of 'Good', takes place and IROs are alerted to these.

This year children subject to **Deprivation of Liberty Orders** were reviewed every 3 months by IROs in line with last year's recommendations.

Medway's registered children's home Eden House, continued to offer a bespoke offer for the children they cared for, and plans to open another, for learning disabled and neurodiverse children is being progressed.

Medway's short breaks provision Parklands continued to offer support for disabled children and their families with work to independently review these care arrangements **through reg 48 of The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010, by IROs**, being operationalised later this coming year after ongoing challenge from the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance service (including the IRO service manager) during this reporting period.

Medway's fostering service have continued to roll out the evidence based '**Mockingbird**' **programme which 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. IROs remain positive about its impact and support for carers and children and support its further expansion. The inclusion of Medway in the Kinship Allowance Pilot and wider Kinship Programme supports family members being awarded Special Guardianship Orders and Child Arrangement Orders care proceedings or in pre-proceedings work, evidencing some children will avoid care. If successful, this may reduce the numbers of children entering care in Medway.

At the end of this year **the percentage of children in long term foster care**, defined as 'the percentage of children with long-term fostering as a plan, where the child is in a long-term fostering placement' stood below the target of 70% at 57%, and higher than last year's 54%.

This is a considerable achievement and mainly relates to the corporate parenting service taking a relentless focus on matching children to their carers; supported by their permanence lead. The introduction of a 14+ matching process away from fostering panels has strengthened this work. Like last year, there is a national lack of sufficiency of care arrangements for older children with complex care needs and sometimes for local care arrangements, whereby children have had to move to areas they do not have established links to, until they can be moved back in a planned manner. Like last year, some children's care arrangements broke down because of carers not understanding a range of complex behaviours and lacked a trauma informed approach. School exclusions significantly weakened foster carers abilities to manage, some children, and a few carers were challenged when children with needs still emerging did not sleep much at night times.

Improved stability for CiC. The number of children under 16 years who have been with the same carers for 2.5 years or more has increased to 72% from 61% last year, lower than the stretch target of 75% and the same as statistical neighbours. The percentage of children with long-term fostering as a plan, where the child is in a long-term fostering placement sat at 57% improved from 51% at the end of the previous year.

Children with three or more care arrangements sat at 11% down from 14%, and 1% above national and statistical rates of 10%. This is a significant improvement and indicative of the drive in the corporate parenting service and the permanence lead, making sure carers are fully involved in meetings and plans for children.

Medway has employed an **Agency Decision Maker** to consider all adoption decisions and matches for children in care; this has improved challenge to the services and greater collaboration with the IRO service regarding their input to children's permanence records.

In March 26, the percentage of CiC that have been in care for 12+ months that have had same social worker for last 12 months stood at 37%, an improvement from 23% in March the previous year; although the average of the past 2 years sit at 29% and 30% when aggregated over the 12-month periods. This relates to the national and local challenges of recruiting to frontline social workers. Like last year, for some children this led to delays in progressing their care plans.

As last year, IROs continued to ask about the main relationships children have formed in care, and how to best use these in care planning, in line with the policy position of 'Stable Homes Built on Love' (2023).¹ They continued to ask for the progression of **life story work and work to help children understand why they have experienced moves in care**, by written explanations and in words and pictures. This remains a focus for the corporate parenting service and there is some gap in social workers feeling confident to undertake this

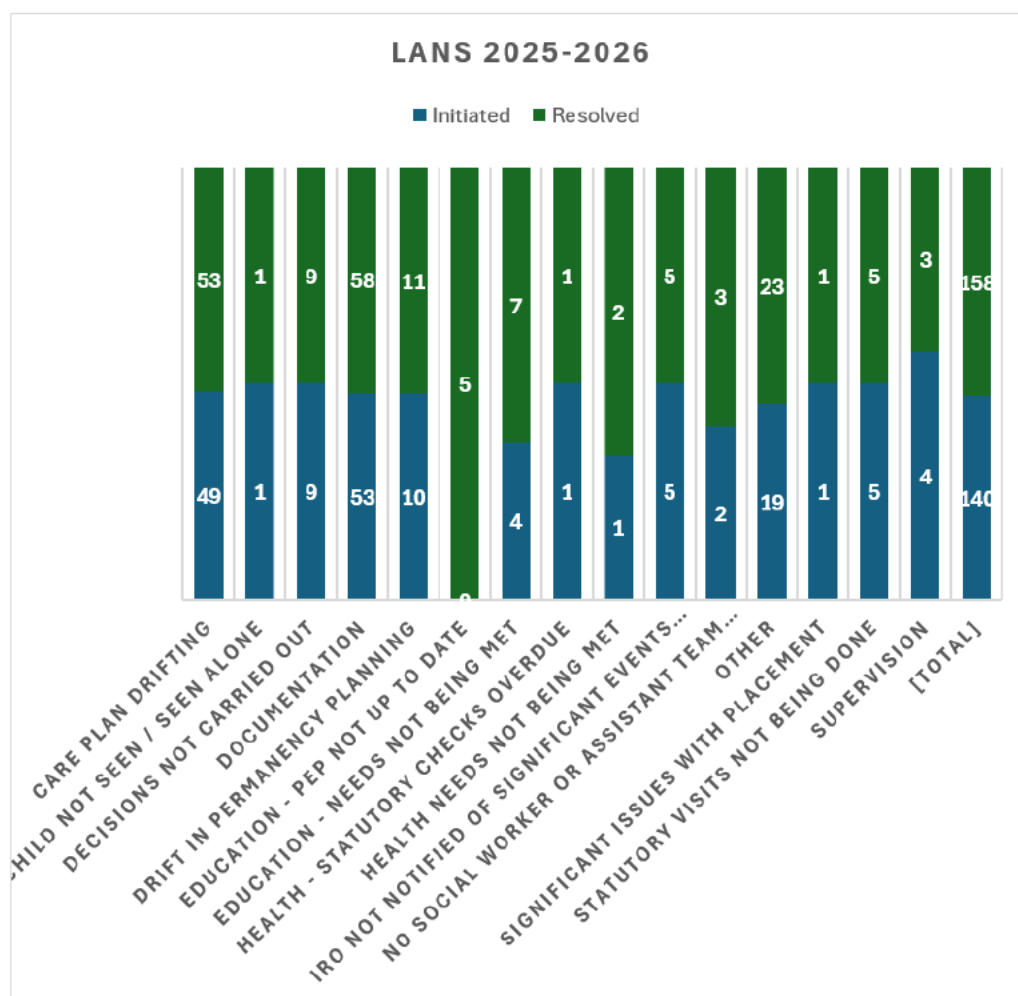
¹ Dfe (2023) Children's Social Care: Stable Homes Built on Love

work and prioritise this in home visits or specific sessional work alongside the rest of the professional network. IRO's will continue to raise the timing and quality of life story work for children, and this will again be an increased focus of IRO service planning for the year ahead.

IROs continued to use the **Learning and Accountability Notifications (LANs)** as a key function of the IRO service is to raise any issues affecting a child's care and gaps in their needs being met. This is an established escalation process reinforced and supported in Medway's procedures and practice, which is updated annually by the IRO service manager. IROs seek resolutions informally through collaborative dialogue, with the social worker and team manager, before and at each stage of the procedure, but if no resolution is achieved the dispute is escalated to the attention of senior managers.

There were less LANs raised and resolved by IROs during this year, with 140 initiated, (from last year's 164) and 158 resolved (from last year's 162). Most LANs were raised at stage 1, with Team Managers, and resolved quickly, with some, for more serious issues, raised at stage 2 with Service Managers. The main challenges related to documentation, (53/140 or 38%) mainly social worker's reports not being shared with IROs, children and young people, before their reviews. Drifts in care plans and permanence planning represented a theme needing to improve for several children standing at 59/140 or 42%.

The table below shows the number of LANs initiated and resolved last year with reasons



Quarterly reporting of LANs, and any other quality assurance activities in the service are included in the Practice Development Service quarterly report which is scrutinised by the children's services management team (CSMT) and shared with children's services via Quality Assurance, Performance Improvement Board (QAPIB). Themes arising from LAN's considered as part of the thematic audit plan for the following year.

This year the IRO service manager at the request of the Director of Children's services, completed **two reports about the use of S20 for this period**. The main findings were that S20 was well used and proportionate as an interim measure for most children, whilst care proceedings were initiated and Interim Care Orders granted. Overall, the use of S20 was right at the time they were agreed, including for older unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, they were being considered by permanence panels in a timely manner and PLO process were initiated when needed. The quality of supervision and management oversight needed strengthening for some children. Where there was confusion about the use of family arrangements versus the use of S20, by social work teams this led to poor decision making

and drift and delay in progressing children's plans. Some children's records would have benefited from accurate recording of any police protection prior to S20 being in place, as an entry to care. For a few children police bail conditions rendering parents unable to physically care for their children, took too long to be challenged and dropped by the police. There was a lack of evidence-based interventions being evidenced in work to reunify adolescents with parents, or to assess any ongoing needs when parents de-accommodated their children or 16–17-year-olds de-accommodated themselves, from S20 arrangements. Had there been use of an assessment tool to evidence why reunification was being ruled out for older children who had entered care this would have strengthened work. For older children with complex needs, intensive support at the stage they entered care or were on the edge of care, should have been better developed.

Children's care plans, as reported last year, for children in care under the age of 16 remained an area to embed. Work took place this year, led by the Corporate Parenting service and the IRO service, to develop a plan and to implement this (from 01.09.2026); the IRO service manager provided support and a steer for this work in its design, consultations with staff and advice about how best to embed it. Once this is progressed, the streamlining of care plans for children and young people with other plans, into one cohesive plan, will be more achievable. This work has been delayed, and it is hoped this is actioned and embedded as soon as possible.

Like last year **IROs continued to track** their midway reviews, their visits to children, their pre-discussions for reviews with children's social workers. They raised challenge in Learning and Accountability Notifications (LANs), and 'signs of success' that they noticed in social work teams' practice. IRO 'footprint' on children's files is evident and being maintained. IROs are still using monitoring forms to aid their practice, and as like last year these should be reviewed annually.

As last year, IROs actively supported **participation events** with children and sat on the participation corporate parenting group. They encouraged, and accompanied children to such events, (summer BBQ, 'Time to Shine' celebrations, football matches) and encouraged them to participate in Medway Children and Young People's Council groups. They help children cared for by Medway to use the 'Mind of my Own' app and use it themselves to stay in touch with children, as well as using 'What's App' messaging, texts, video, phone calls, e-mails, and visits to see children between and before reviews.

Work to support children and young people to **chair their review meetings** will need further emphasis next year. **IRO Profiles have been co-produced with children** this year at an activity afternoon and need to be printed and circulated. Feedback has been collected from children about their reviews, with this being an area to further develop and embed across the service.

5. IRO IMPACT

Quality assurance activity took place within the IRO service; IROs participated in the monthly learning audits undertaken in services. This involved IROs visiting children and families for feedback and holding reflective conversations with social workers. IROs held conversations with teams to ensure practice standards and learning were in place, with any remedial actions agreed and monitored.

IROs made sure that the right legal status of the child remained appropriate, for their care plan, formally recording their views or 'footprint' in social work statements and final care plans. IROs spoke regularly to children's Guardian's (appointed to represent children in their care proceedings) and can be called on in family proceedings to give their views. IROs must have direct access to Independent legal advice to enable them to effectively challenge; this continued to be in place for IROs this year. IROs can, if all disputes are exhausted, refer to CAFCASS directly; this did not happen last year. There has been some consultation with 2 service leads in CAFCASS, with the IRO service manager, with the line into the Head of Service not as well preserved like before, after the retirement of the previous postholder; this remains an area to strengthen.

IROs continued to scrutinise adoption support plans, and considered national adoption messages, with a move to greater open adoption. IROs emphasised the need for social work teams to be more rigorous in understanding family relationships, and their maintenance in long term care arrangements to older birth relatives during their childhood. IROs contribute to child Permanence Records, and the Agency Decision Maker has commented on their positive contributions.

Regular quarterly meetings with the Looked After Children designated nursing team managers, takes place with the IRO service manager. These remain purposeful for checking the progress of individual children's referrals for specialist assessments and any feedback from this health team for children in care.

IROs continued to offer mapping work, part of Medway's 'Signs of Safety' preferred practice model, to teams, particularly in relation to complex work, and IROs remain linked to specific service areas assisting managers and social workers with all things related to care planning for children in care. This year there was a drive in the assessment teams when children entered care through police protection to accurately record this in children's care episodes, leading to a more accurate and increased record in the yearly performance reporting. IROs worked with the Child Protection Chairs effectively when children on a child protection plan entered care, with some Child Protection Chairs attending initial CiC reviews.

The IRO Service Manager continued to attend the national and southeast regions IRO Managers group (NIROMP and SEIROM) to share local and national successes, challenges and learning within IRO services such as local arrangements for short breaks for disabled children.

The IRO Service Manager sits on key panels, in Medway, and is regularly invited to service specific panels tracking and advising on planned outcomes for children. They are responsible for chairing all secure accommodation reviews (SAR) for any child placed into secure accommodation, on welfare grounds, through the family courts, subject to a Secure Order. There has been one child this year in a secure setting, and 3 reviews were held in person. The lack of good nationally available care arrangements (children's homes) which can respond well to children with complex needs, utilising a trauma informed approach and an understanding of their psychiatric and emotional conditions remains a national problem, when seeking step downs from secure settings, despite plans from the care review ²(2022) and national fostering reforms to ensure these are developed in the future.

This year the IRO service manager and service manager for the 16+ service developed an 18+ offer, which is agreed to be implemented by 1.9.26 and with the Children and Young Persons Disabled service senior leads developed a review of short breaks IRO reviews under reg 48.

Individual examples of IROs making a difference for children included the following:

- **Reunification work-** IROs have continued to ask for assessments to be undertaken for parents and family members, when conditions seem to suggest they may be able to be successful. They have challenged gaps in work at first reviews where reunification is planned but work has not commenced to achieve this. This has involved IROs visiting families at times.
- **Recommendations for adoption of children-** this year one teenager was adopted with consent by his carers, supported by their IRO.
- **Life story work.** Like last year IROs made recommendations for children to receive written accounts of reasons they entered care, the reasons they may have moved in care stressing its importance across the professional system.
- **Cultural needs being met.** IROs have considered the short, medium and long-term impact of trans racial care arrangements in matching reports and in care planning meetings and how any gaps will be effectively addressed.
- **Promoting children remained connected.** IROs continued to review and challenge family time arrangements where they fell short, to important family and friends, based on updated social work assessment of their family circumstances. They encouraged social workers to see children's families so that they can reassure children about their parents and be a link between them and their parents.
- **Increasing safety:** IROs continued to make sure that review meetings were child friendly and that they focused on the plans for children and the care they were receiving in an inclusive manner for children. This meant some challenging

² MacAlister J (2022) Independent Review of children's social care final report (Dfe)

conversations and separate consultations had to take place away from review meetings if participants' behaviours were negatively impacting the children.

- **Care planning.** IROs continued to challenge and support the right plans at the right time for children in care.
- **Advocacy.** IROs supported children to name any worries they had to their carers, social workers, parents and the professional network to speedily resolve these. They referred children to Medway's formal advocacy services and to independent visitors where necessary.
- **Safeguarding.** IROs continued to challenge plans where they needed to be strengthened for example regarding domestic abuse dynamics, safe family time arrangements.
- **Challenge to assessments and plans in care proceedings.** IROs continued to challenge some planning proposed in care proceedings, in their views to court, and in discussion with the Children's Guardians, leading to better decision making for children. IROs continued to note gaps in some specialist assessments before the courts and made sure these were addressed, informing final decisions.
- **Direct work.** IRO continue to work directly with children and their families, where they can help better relationships develop professionally or with family members.
- **Coaching and support for Social Workers.** IROs have supported new social workers to the child in preparing for reviews and what is expected from them.

6. IRO SERVICE DEVELOPMENT FOR 2026 - 2027

This Annual Report identifies several service priorities that will be taken forward in the year 2026-2027.

- Collaborate with teams to develop and improve children's life story work.
- Children's care plans: continue to support work to embed care plans for children in care, aged under 16 years and under.
- Refresh how IROs help young people to chair their review meetings
- Provide IRO review of disabled children's short breaks (reg 48) from 1.9.26
- Provide ongoing review of Pathway Planning, post 18 for care leavers, with their consent, though Medway's 18+ offer commencing 1.9.26
- Strengthen the relationship with local CAFCASS leads
- Strengthen feedback from children and review participants to strengthen service deliver and learning

7. CONCLUSIONS

Medway is meeting its duties to children they care for and plan to extend these to disabled children's short breaks along with an 18+ care leavers offer for IROs to oversight next year.

Stand-alone care plans have been developed and there are plans to implement this next year; this should happen at pace.

Children in care's stability in care is improving, and this should be maintained, with greater life story work and tools to support this being undertaken by social workers where possible.

Permanence planning is strengthened and allows for all options for children to be explored with greater involvement of foster carers than previously. Matching work increased for CiC this year and should be maintained.

Children's reviews continue to be timely with those children on DOL Orders reviewed by IROs 3 monthly.

The impact of the planned reforms in children's social care and the improved Kinship local offer and pilot, is an opportunity to strengthen families and potentially reduce the number of children entering care in the years to come.


Signed: Amanda Harris
(Service Manager IRO Service)

Date: 27th July 2026

Signed: _____ Date: _____
(Director of People - Children and Adults)

Signed: _____ Date: _____
(Portfolio Holder for Children's Services - Lead Member)

DRAFT