



SUFFICIENCY STRATEGY 2026-2029

A PLACE TO CALL HOME (Children Matter in Medway)



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What is this strategy about?

This Sufficiency Strategy sets out how Medway Council will **prevent children from entering care wherever it is safe to do so**, and how it will **provide and commission the right homes, care and support** for children in care and care-experienced young people when they cannot remain within their families.

The strategy covers the period **April 2026 – April 2029** and reflects:

- Our statutory duties as a Local Authority (LA)
- National children's social care reforms
- Regional priorities and market conditions
- Local needs, data trends and the lived experiences of children, families and care leavers in Medway

It is a core strategic document that will guide **practice, commissioning, market shaping and partnership working** across children's social care.

A **child- and family-friendly version** will be produced alongside this document to highlight key priorities, progress and areas of development.

Who is this strategy for?

This document is a strategic strategy that informs all those working in and around children's social care what the current sufficiency needs are and how we will try and address them over the next 3 years. A child and family friendly version will also be produced highlighting key areas of success and development

INTRODUCTION FROM THE AD

Since the launch of the last strategy in January 2023 a lot has changed in Medway. Shortly after it was published, we had a full ILACS inspection and for the first time in our history Medway achieved a "Good" Rating by Ofsted with them stating that In Medway "Children Matter" (Ofsted 2023).

Despite this improvement, we continue to be ambitious for our children and to build on the achievements of our "Good" Ofsted inspection and since that time we have made significant progress against our previous sufficiency strategy. We want our children and young people to be safe, happy and achieve their potential. The right support must be in place to enable them to live with their families, when it is safe for them to do so. Where that is not possible, it is essential that we have the right services and support in place to care for those children, and to ensure that they grow up in supportive and stable homes where their needs are met, and which promote their outcomes.

Ensuring that we have sufficient services available and places to call home is critical to meeting those objectives. Our children and young people in Medway are unique. They will each have their individual experience of family life and growing up and it's essential that we value and respect such uniqueness and have services and placements that reflect this. When challenges arise in families that makes it difficult for them to care for their children, it is important that we have sufficient and high-quality support available to try and prevent family breakdown. But also, in the event that it is right for a child or young person to live outside of their family, it is vital that they are not disadvantaged by this, and the right support is available for them too.

We want our children to succeed whatever their pathway. This is why we have set our priorities for sufficiency on the following four foundations, which reflect the child's journey to adulthood and independence.

Building Bridges
A Place to Call Home
Promoting Stability
Stepping Forward

We look forward to working with you all to bring this strategy to life and continue to ensure that children matter in Medway

Kind Regards

Kelly Cogger - Assistant Director of Children's Social Care

1. Our Vision

Medway is ambitious for its children. We want every child to grow up **safe, loved and supported**, with strong relationships and opportunities to succeed.

This strategy is informed by:

- Data and performance insight
- The voices of children and care leavers
- Practice learning and inspection findings

Young people consistently tell us they want **places they can call home**, where they feel cared for and respected. This principle underpins everything in this strategy.

Our ambition is for our sufficiency strategy to be a "live" document, which is underpinned by a dynamic dataset and effective use of business intelligence, to ensure that plans are current, and that providers can respond more dynamically to our local need. The strategy should be reviewed on an annual basis and underpinned by action plans and trackers to allow for progress to be monitored and issues highlighted.

2. Statutory Duties, Responsibilities and Principles

All LA's are required to take steps that secure, as far as reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation and support within their local area. These services need to meet the needs of children and young people that the local authority is looking after, and those who have recently left care at the age 18.

The duty for the local authority to provide placements for children in care is explicit in the Children Act 1989. In 2010, the statutory guidance for the sufficiency duty was issued. The guidance places a duty on LAs to act strategically to address gaps in provision by ensuring that they include, in relevant commissioning strategies, their plans for meeting the sufficiency duty.

The Children Act 2004 defines sufficiency as "a whole system approach which delivers early intervention and preventative work to help support children and their families where possible, as well as providing better services for children if they become looked after".

This strategy sets out how Medway Council as the corporate parent will continue to provide and commission the right care and support for children in our care (CiC) and care experienced young people that best meets their needs. It reflects on achievements of the last 3 years, identifies any areas of improvement that need to be made and any emerging needs from the 2023 strategy.

This refreshed strategy covers the period April 2026 – April 2028. Performance data in the strategy is based on information reviewed following a snapshot of metrics in December 2025 or where national data is published. Our ambition is for our sufficiency strategy to be informed

by datasets held by the Council and its partners, underpinned by a dynamic dataset and effective use of business intelligence. This will ensure that plans are current, and providers can respond more dynamically to our local need. The strategy can't contain everything, but we have included key information and data.

Given the anticipated impact of **Local Government Reorganisation**, this is intentionally a **two-year strategy**, allowing flexibility as future governance and geographic arrangements become clearer.

3. National and Regional Context

Since the publication of the last strategy the subject of placements and children's social care has had greater oversight by national bodies and the national media interested into the structure, availability, costs and functioning of the children's placement market.

This is about challenging issues surrounding profit margins, quality of care and the impact of large national companies dominating market share and the profit margins being experienced by some providers in the sector. The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) highlighted this in their Children's social care market study report (March 2022), concluding that there are significant problems in how the placement market is functioning. In 2024 the National Children's Home Association deemed the situation in residential as "verging on a crisis" and that LAs face huge challenges to find the right homes for children in care that are of a good quality and that are financially appropriate.

In Medway we have done well to manage the market as a small LA but there is still more work to do around creating a market and economy that meets the outcomes and needs of our young people. We will continue to strive to achieve the best outcomes for our children and families as we navigate the change.

Children's Social Care Reforms

The UK's children's social care reforms, launched in 2024, aim to transform the system to ensure families receive the help they need, children are safe, and care leavers have stable homes. Key elements of the reforms include:

- Kinship Care: Supporting kinship carers and ensuring they receive the necessary financial and practical support to care for children in need.
- Family Help and Early Intervention: Merging early help and child-in-need provision into one unified structure to address family issues without stigma.
- Stability and Safety: Ensuring children are safe in and outside their homes and acting swiftly to protect them from harm.
- Stable Homes: Providing stable homes for children in care and care leavers, with a focus on keeping families together whenever possible

Regional Care Co-operative (Home and Future)

The establishment of a Regional Care Co-operative (Home and Future) in the Southeast was also approved in 2024 and has now established itself, with Medway as a core Member. Medway were also successful in gaining a capital grant via the RCC of around £1m to

further develop our residential offer further progressing the local and national ambitions of creating more residential beds locally.

Regional Sufficiency Strategy

A Regional Sufficiency Strategy was published in early 2026 and dovetails with this localised strategy and shares many similar priorities.

Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill

The introduction of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill focusses on a number of key areas and will influence significant change over the course of the lifetime of this strategy and beyond. Areas of focus are:

- 1) Family Help & Early Intervention
- 2) Strengthening Kinship Care
- 3) Improving Safeguarding & Multi-Agency Collaboration
- 4) Increasing Placement Sufficiency & Supporting Care Leavers

4. Medway: The Place and the People

About our local area

Medway is located on the north coast of Kent, neighboured by Kent County Council and the London Boroughs of Bexley, Bromley to the east. The main towns include (from west to east) Strood, Rochester, Chatham, Gillingham, and Rainham. While the towns are densely populated, there are larger, much more sparsely populated rural areas. e.g. the Hoo Peninsula (north Medway).

The last census data (2021) shows that Medway has a population of 279,800. The population is younger compared to England, with 23.4% of the population aged under 18 years. This equates to around 65,400 children and young people.

Most of the population are classified as White British, with the next largest ethnic group being Asian. Medway is ranked mid-range nationally (**70th out of 153 upper-tier authorities** for deprivation-related measures) but contains some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in England; these neighbourhoods are in Gillingham and Chatham.

Medway now has an agreed local plan which will enable Health, social care and educational services to better plan for the future needs in the area.

Local Context

Much has changed in Medway since the last Sufficiency Strategy was launched in 2023. Medway had a full Inspection of Local Authority Childrens Services (ILACS) inspection in 2023 where the authority was rated GOOD for the first time in its history with Ofsted stating that "Children matter in Medway" and subsequent focussed visits in 2025 have demonstrated further improvements as well as areas of development.

In April 2024 the authority had a full SEND inspection under the new Framework. As part of our inspection readiness for 2026/27 we are preparing for an ILACS, a Youth Justice

Inspection (HMIP) and potential Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) and a SEND inspection. We continue to be committed to improving services for all children in Medway.

Medway joined the National Transfer scheme in July 2023 and have since taken over 80 young unaccompanied asylum seekers into our care and have been praised by the scheme for our support and engagement in that period.

Medway have also collaborated with the Government of Jersey (GoJ) and now provide Placement and Quality Assurance services for the Island. The first year demonstrated clear improved outcomes and quality of placements and a significant saving for GoJ and an income stream for Medway. This demonstrates the quality of the service that is provided and the transferability of our processes and procedures.

Significant leadership changes have occurred; Labour and co-operative now control the authority following local elections and a new Assistant Director Kelly Cogger being appointed in 2025.

5. Key Data for children's services

Number of Children in Care in Medway

In Medway, the numbers of children in need of help and protection have increased since the last strategy. The number of children in need cases open to Medway has risen in past 3 years with the rate at the end of December 2025 was 337.8 per 10k of child population, which is in line with ONS stat neighbours (309.8), CIPFA (339.7) and England (330.3).

At the end of Dec 2025 there were 539 children in care compared to 458 in 2023. The rate has increased rapidly rising nearly 20% in three years this is due to an increase in need, a rise in larger sibling groups coming into care and joining the National Transfer Scheme.

As of December 2025, Medway has 211 care experienced young people aged 18+ compared to 180 in Jan 2023.

The rate of children in care in Medway has seen a significant increase, the needs of the children and young people in our care often have complex needs. Children are coming in to care at an older age; the pressure for demand for homes largely comes from a growing cohort of 11–17-year-olds.

Average age of Children in Care

Average care start age for children entering care in 2025 was 9.1 years, this is up from 8.8years in 2024 and 8.5years in 2023. This is likely because of an increasing amount of large sibling groups coming into care alongside an increasing proportion of UASCs entering care in Medway over the past couple of years which has helped push this average up.

Factors affecting vulnerable adolescents

There are several different factors affecting vulnerable adolescents in Medway. These include child sexual exploitation (CSE), criminal exploitation (CCE) and County Lines, offending and re-offending. The Council as a corporate parent, has a responsibility to support children in its care, but ultimately a wider responsibility to ensure that Medway is an

environment where adolescents grow up, safe in their communities and schools, understanding and developing healthy relationships, in a safe place free from adverse situations and experience they may have had.

Early Intervention

Early intervention is key and ensuring the support offer for prevention is strong. This includes wrapping support around parents, intervening at an early stage via our Family Solutions Offer and the child or young person being supported via our Multidisciplinary Service (MDS) and working with partners and other services to support and disrupt negative activity.

Number of Children in Care with Educational Health Care Plans (EHCPs)

There were 49 CIC in December 2025 who had an EHCP which is approximately 9% of all children in care. This is a small increase (around 1% higher) than the 2023 figures.

Employment, education or training (EET)

The percentage of 16- and 17-year-olds in EET continues to be above national averages; the latest Medway figures for 2025 track at around 19% whereas the national data set in 2024 showed a 5% average. This is caveated by the delay in release of national data for 2025 which is expected to be significantly higher than the year before and the small cohort we have in Medway. This is a continued priority and area of development in Medway and for the Virtual School.

Care

Proceedings

Delays in care proceedings continue to hinder timely permanence, with many cases exceeding the 26-week target due to family court capacity pressures. While engagement with the Designated Family Judge Trailblazer Pilot has brought some improvement, delays still impact care planning and stability for children. The service is responding through strengthened tracking, management oversight, multidisciplinary support, and the use of tools such as the NSPCC Reunification Framework. Overall practice and planning are improving, but external court pressures mean permanence is not always achieved as swiftly as intended.

Where are our children and young people living?

Most children in our care in Medway live in family settings. We believe that this type of placement is in many cases, the best arrangement for children, allowing for the development of attachments to main care givers and the experience which most closely represents a place they can call home. As of December 2025, 67%, of Medway's Children in Care were in foster placements compared to 69% in 2023. This is down to an increase in the age of children coming into care and joining the NTS where the majority of children are 16-plus and move into Supported Accommodation.

Children living with internal foster carers has dropped from 111 children in 2023 to 85 now and children placed with Independent Foster Carer agencies (IFA) has risen from 211 in 2023 to 273 now.

Where possible our aim is to place children with a Medway Council foster carers as these are carers overseen and supported by our own in-house fostering service. As of December 2025, 26% of children living with foster carers, were being cared for by our own foster carers, and the remainder (41%) were cared for by independent or private foster carers. At this time, 8%

of children were living with connected carers, who are carers from the child's own extended family network.

Children and young people in care (on Dec 25)

Accommodation type	Internal	External	Other	Total	%
<i>Foster home</i>	85	273		358	66.4%
<i>Placed for Adoption</i>	-	-	14	14	2.6%
<i>Placed with Parents</i>	-	-	9	9	1.7%
<i>Connected Carers</i>		-	45	45	8.4%
<i>Children's Residential Home</i>	4	40		44	8.2%
<i>Parent and Child Accommodation</i>	-		5	5	0.9%
<i>Residential School 52 week</i>	-	2		2	0.3%
<i>Health Provision</i>	-	-	0	0	0%
<i>Secure Accommodation</i>	-	1	0	1	0.2%
<i>Supported Accommodation</i>		58	0	58	10.8%
<i>Youth Offending Institute</i>	-	1		1	0.2%
<i>Supported Homes</i>	2			2	0.3%
				539 (539)	100%

Consistency and stability are foundational to children's emotional wellbeing and long-term outcomes. Children are most likely to thrive when they experience stable, nurturing care within a home where they feel a strong sense of belonging, supported by continuity in relationships, routines and key attachments.

We have been successful in securing long-term stability for a significant proportion of children in our care, with 69% having remained with the same carers for more than 2.5 years. This reflects strong practice in placement support and permanence planning. However, this progress is increasingly under pressure due to an insufficient supply of suitable local placements, particularly for children with more complex needs.

These sufficiency challenges have limited our ability to achieve optimal matching and have contributed to an increase in placement instability, with 11% of children experiencing three or more placements in the past year. While this figure is comparable with our statistical neighbours, it represents a clear risk to children's wellbeing and highlights the urgency of addressing local placement capacity.

We remain committed to supporting children to live in or close to their local communities wherever it is safe and aligns with their wishes. Local placements are critical in enabling children to maintain meaningful family and community connections and ensuring timely access to support services, education and therapeutic provision. Strengthening local sufficiency is therefore central to improving stability, outcomes and experiences for our children.

Care Leavers - Where are our care-experienced young people living?

In Medway we have 210 care leavers (172 under 21 and 38 over 21)

The percentage of our care leavers (aged 18-21) in suitable accommodation in Medway is 92% (158), which is above the national figure of 88%. The remaining 8% (13) are deemed as being in unsuitable accommodation (this includes temporary and emergency housing or in prison). The overall number of care leavers has increased over the past 3 years the % in suitable accommodation has remained the same.

Of our care leavers:

- 27 18-21 -year-olds continue to live with their former foster carers after leaving care in Staying Put arrangements.
- 7 live in shared lives arrangements.
- 34 young people live in supported accommodation after leaving care. These are houses where the council commission both the accommodation and support (this includes those funded by adult social care).

6. Areas of Development since 2023

There have been significant developments across all of the priorities since 2023. The following are summarised examples:

Family Solutions Offer

Over the past year, Medway has strengthened its preventative offer through an expanded Family Solutions model. This multi-disciplinary service provides coordinated, wraparound support to children and families involved with statutory social work. Key elements include adolescent support, family group conferencing, a specialist assessment team, and the Family Partnership. The aim is to support more children to safely remain within their family networks and reduce entry into care. While still early in its delivery, the offer continues to be embedded and developed.

Family Partnership Project

Launched in April 2022 with health partners, the Family Partnership Project supports parents who have previously lost children through public law proceedings to safely care for future children. Over 100 highly vulnerable families have engaged, accessing timely specialist services such as therapeutic counselling, advocacy, and domestic abuse support.

Residential and Family Assessments

Medway currently lacks sufficient residential assessment and parent-and-child placements required for court proceedings. Work is underway to expand provision and increase assessment capacity. Alongside this, intensive pre-proceedings work aims to reduce risk and prevent escalation into care. The Multi-Disciplinary Service now delivers home-based assessments, reducing reliance on residential placements.

Elizabeth Court, a 12-bed low-level parent and child service, has been strengthened with more flexibility and support and higher usage from families engaging with social care.

Reduction in Unregistered Care

Unregistered placements have reduced significantly, from 18 in 2024 to just one by December 2025. This has been achieved through emergency fostering, market development, and the reopening of an in-house children's home. Despite national shortages, Medway's ambition is to eradicate unregulated placements wherever possible, though limited use may occasionally be necessary due to demand and regulatory constraints.

Kinship Care

Kinship care continues to grow, enabling more children to remain within their families. Over 300 children are now placed in kinship arrangements, with further development underway in partnership with national bodies. Bids for Kinship Pilot money have been submitted.

Parent and Child and Family Placements

Demand for parent-and-child and family assessments has increased due to changes in court thresholds. National capacity is limited, particularly for higher-risk families and complex assessments. Developing bespoke local provision remains a strategic priority.

Short Breaks (SEND)

Significant transformation of Short Breaks has taken place over the past three years, with streamlined processes and cleared backlogs. Day and weekend provision has more than doubled since 2023.

Key developments include Parklands overnight respite care expanding numbers and achieving Ofsted "good" and an expanded partnership with Rivermead Inclusive Trust (ROCC), leading to national recognition. Further diversification of provision remains a priority.

Fostering (In-House)

Medway's priority is to place children locally in family-based care, using in-house foster carers wherever safe and appropriate. In-house foster care is more cost-effective than IFA placements, enabling reinvestment in early help and prevention.

The Annual In-House Fostering Report 2024–25 confirms a focus on:

- Targeted recruitment across diverse communities
- Embedding the Mockingbird model
- Enhanced support, including therapeutic hubs
- Participation in the Southeast Fostering Hub

Independent Foster Care Agencies (IFAs)

Most commissioning frameworks have been refreshed. A joint Medway/Kent IFA framework (live since 2022), CCRAG membership, and a Medway-only supported accommodation framework have significantly expanded provider choice.

IFA placements increased from 317 in 2023 to 358 in 2025, reflecting rising care numbers while maintaining family-based care.

Residential Children's Homes

Despite national pressures, Medway has limited growth in residential care by reducing unregulated placements and opening its own home. Residential provision is recognised as appropriate for some young people, either by preference or to provide short-term stability.

Currently:

- 45 children live in residential care
- 2 young people with learning disabilities are in residential schools
- More placements are now within 20 miles of Medway
- Reliance on residential care has increased slightly due to foster carer shortages and rising complexity, from 8% (39 children) in 2023 to (45 children) 9% currently—still below the national average of around 11%.
- Medway operates two registered in-house homes: **Eden House** (opened October 2024): 5-bed EBD home and **Parklands**: short-break residential provision supporting up to 60 children annually. Both are rated "Good" by Ofsted. A third 5-bed learning disabilities home (Aut Evan) is under renovation and due to open in late 2026.

Provider Relationships

Strong strategic relationships and regular market-engagement forums support placement sufficiency and cost control. Membership of LASER and CCRAG frameworks provides access to a wide provider base.

Supported Accommodation (Commissioning and Market Shaping)

New DPS frameworks (2023) have attracted over 40 supported accommodation providers, expanding local placement options and wraparound support. Services include trauma-informed workers, PBS, RMNs, personal care, and restraint-trained staff.

New Ofsted regulations (2024) mean only one child remains in unregistered accommodation, down from 17

Emergency Fostering Provision

Two local providers Hazel Project and Anchor Fostering (both rated Outstanding by Ofsted) deliver emergency placements for up to six nights, supporting children at immediate risk. These provisions have supported nearly 100 young people in three years and significantly reduced out-of-area and unregulated placements.

Permanence

Permanence remains central, supported by early planning, Family Group Conferencing, permanency panels, and a dedicated lead. Between March 2024 and April 2025:

- 43 children returned home
- 22 achieved long-term matches
- 18 secured SGOs

Regional Adoption Agency arrangements continue to strengthen adoption outcomes.

Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs)

SGOs provide long-term family-based care while preserving birth family links. Medway currently has 258 children under SGOs. Approved Regulation 24 placements are projected to increase by around 50% by the end of 2025/26. SGO exits numbered 17 in 2025, with no consistent trend over recent years.

Refugee Children (UASC)

Since joining the National Transfer Scheme in 2024, Medway has supported 66 young people, with almost all placed in regulated provision within five days. As of December 2025, 38 under-18 refugee children were in care. Medway has been commended nationally for its child-focused approach. Challenges remain around Home Office decision times for care leavers.

Housing and Accommodation for Care Leavers

As of March 2025, 96% of care leavers were in suitable accommodation. Support includes:

- A specialist housing advisor
- £2,000–£3,000 Setting Up Home Allowance
- Council tax exemption to age 25

Strategic Housing Collaboration

Care leaver needs are embedded into Medway's Housing Strategy to 2030. A joint Move-On Team works across housing and children's services to reduce delays in securing accommodation.

Support for Independence

Care leavers receive practical support with budgeting, tenancy management, and life skills. The Care Leavers Hub in Strood provides advice, activities, and access to essential facilities.

Supported and Semi-Independent Living

Around 64% of Medway's care population is aged 10–17. Many older young people require extended support beyond 18, reflected in increased panel requests. Strong provider relationships and Ofsted regulation have improved quality but increased placement costs.

Supported Homes Scheme

Medway's Supported Homes scheme (formerly supported lodgings) is now registered. Further recruitment is needed, particularly for 16–17-year-olds.

Housing Collaboration

Ongoing collaboration with housing services has increased care leaver tenancies. A dedicated housing officer within social care and alignment with council-wide housing development plans support improved outcomes, though challenges remain post-18.

7. Sufficiency Trends and Challenges

Children living out of area

A majority of our children and young people in care are living outside Medway's local area (62%). 64% of children in our care live within 20 miles of their family home (this includes those outside of our area but in Kent). This has remained consistent over the past 3 years but the actual numbers rather than the % has increased alongside the rapid rise in CiC numbers.

We continue to make progress through our market shaping work with providers, but we have continued to see increasing challenges in meeting the needs of Medway's children. There has been an increase of local providers not meeting Ofsted or our standards with over 60 providers embargoed for use.

This presents considerable challenges to our sufficiency locally, leading to Medway often having to place children at a distance.

Children entering care at a later age

More children are coming into our care at a later age. The number of children coming in to care aged 10-15 years old has increased from 34% in 2023 to 37% in 2025. A notable proportion of children entering our care are adolescent males; this is mainly attributable to the NTS scheme which has 92% of its cohort placed in Medway as being adolescent males.

Children with additional support needs

There is significant complexity to the needs of some of our children and young, as well as the ongoing impact of trauma. Coupled with challenges around capacity in some health pathways this can result in the need to develop bespoke high-cost packages of care to support and care for young people. There continues to be insufficient local foster carers who are able to care for children with complex needs to ensure they can live in a family home while in care, and a shortfall of specialist provision nationally. This is an area of focus by Home and Future that is being worked on at a regional level to look at solutions to this. There is also expected reforms from central Government around the recruitment and approach to fostering in Spring 2026.

8. SUFFICIENCY PRIORITIES

Medway’s Sufficiency Strategy (2023-2026) outlined a host of proposals to develop a range of preventative and support interventions and to create a stronger more visible presence with providers to shape the market and provide more local places that our children can call home. This updated strategy outlines work undertaken so far and the new and continuing areas of development.



BUILDING BRIDGES and SUPPORTING FAMILIES

Protecting children and young people, and strengthening families, so they can live safely at home

Outcome:
Fewer children and young people are coming into care



A PLACE TO CALL HOME

Providing caring family homes in Medway for children and young people in care

Outcome:
More children, while in our care, live in family homes in Medway



PROMOTING STABILITY

Offering safe, stable and caring places to live, so children and young people can get the most out of life

Outcome:
Children and young people in care have their individual needs supported at the right time in a safe stable and caring environment



STEPPING FORWARD

Supporting young people to be where they need to be in life so that they can thrive and be independent

Outcome:
More children move to homes which are most suited to them, and young people find suitable places to live after leaving care

Priority 1 - Building bridges and Supporting Families

Protecting children and young people, and strengthening families, so they can live safely at home

Outcome: Fewer children and young people are coming into care

What we have done

- **Ofsted ILACS (July 2023)** rated Medway *Good* overall, a significant improvement from *Inadequate* in 2019. Inspectors found most families now receive timely, effective support that leads to improved outcomes.
- **Targeted interventions**, including family group decision-making and services addressing domestic abuse, parenting, and adolescent exploitation, have reduced harm and improved children's experiences.
- **Early Help** has been strengthened through a single lead professional model, reducing repeat assessments, preventing escalation into statutory services, and building family resilience.
- **Family Hubs and Start for Life (2022–2025)** are now established across Medway, providing integrated perinatal mental health, parenting, and early language support through face-to-face and digital offers, funded by £3.8 million of government investment.
- A **Family Hub app** launched in May 2024, improving access to services, events, and support.
- The **Family Partnership Programme** (launched 2022) continues to perform strongly, preventing an average of seven children per year from entering care and supporting over 100 families at risk of repeat removals.

What will we do:

Continue to strengthen services to support families and prevent children entering care including Family and Child assessment and support provisions.

- Strengthen the potential within family networks, actively involving wider families from the point a child gets a social worker.
- Increase support to families to help children to return to their home through the Family Solutions Provision and multidisciplinary service.
- Improve wrap around support for our most vulnerable adolescent young people - for those going missing and subject to exploitation to keep them in their communities, helping families to cope and developing the youth offer.
- Focus on pre-birth parenting support to provide intensive assessments with parents in the family home, preventing the need for costly residential assessments or parent and child placements, which take families away from their supports and communities.

Priority 2 - A place to call home

Providing loving and caring family homes in Medway for children and young people in care

Outcome: More children, while in our care, live in family homes in Medway

What we have done:

- Introduced and embedded the Mockingbird Model
- Expanded our in-house residential provision
- Continue to provide a high standard of quality assurance meaning our children and young people are only in the best provisions
- Increased market of provisions locally and made Medway a preferred choice of many providers.

What will we do:

- Continue targeted recruitment and marketing to grow the foster carer workforce, with a focus on expanding **in-house provision**, particularly for children aged **10+**.
- Strengthen retention and recruitment of local in-house carers to maintain a sustainable level of fostering capacity.
- Further develop the **Mockingbird and hubs model**, including provision for disabled children.
- Increase availability of **independent fostering agency placements locally** through effective commissioning partnerships and framework management.
- Launch new recruitment campaigns to attract carers despite market pressures, maintaining momentum on in-house recruitment.
- Expand **specialist support services** to stabilise placements and improve outcomes.
- Increase the **number and quality of residential provision** (internal and external) in Medway through market shaping and robust provider monitoring.
- Explore **regional opportunities** to build capacity in specialist provision, including secure, mental health, and LDA services.
- Commission **specialist local services** for complex adolescents—both on the edge of care and in care—at high risk of criminal exploitation or involvement with the criminal justice system.

Priority 3 - Promoting stability

Safe, stable and caring places to live so children and young people can get the most out of life

Outcomes:

- Provide safe, stable, and caring environments for children in care.
- Reduce placement breakdowns and disruptions.
- Ensure relationships with professionals are long lasting and strong
- Strive for permanence where appropriate

What we have done

- Ofsted's ILACS inspection (July 2023) highlighted improvements in placement matching and wraparound support, which have helped reduce the use of unregulated settings.
- The focused visit in April 2025 praised strong corporate commitment and effective partnership working, which supports stability for adolescents at risk of exploitation and disabled children. However, Ofsted flagged variability in assessments and planning, which can affect consistency.
- Medway launched a local emergency fostering provision (EFP) in 2022 to provide short-term regulated care for children in crisis (e.g., placement breakdown or police protection). This provision has successfully supported over 120 children and young people since 2022, preventing out-of-area or unregistered placements and enabled better matching with foster carers. A second EFP opened 2024 to meet growing demand for crisis, and emergency placements.

What will we do:

- Work with foster families to reduce placement breakdowns by providing early, wrap-around support for young people, and their foster carers to maintain stability at home.
- Work on Staff Retention: Ofsted warned that high turnover and recruitment pressures risk undermining progress on stability.
- Reduce delays in Care proceedings to ensure decisions are made in a timely manner and reduce uncertainty
- Find and develop bespoke and tailored provision for our young people with complex needs: Increasing numbers of adolescents with trauma and exploitation risks require intensive support and bespoke placements. Ofsted shows 91% of LA's struggle to find suitable homes for children with complex needs, including those at risk of criminal or sexual exploitation.
- Improve Consistency in Planning: Reduce variability in assessments and management oversight as this continues to impact stability for some children.
- Reduce Out-of-Area Placements: Despite progress, over 160 young people live more than 20 miles away from home (December 2025). This impacts family contact and community links.

Priority 4 - Stepping forward

Supporting young people to be where they need to be in life so that they can thrive and be independent

Outcome: More children move to homes which are most suited to them, and young people find suitable places to live after leaving care

What we have done

- Introduced an enhanced fees structure and additional staffing to better support Special Guardians, addressing financial, practical, and therapeutic needs. This has enabled expanded training, including a bespoke *Skills to Care* course and therapeutic parenting programmes, alongside regular support groups and social events, all of which have been positively received by carers.
- Registered our Supported Homes with Ofsted
- Commissioned bespoke 16plus and 18plus provision locally
- Employed specialist housing advisors
- Provided homes for more than 60 young refugees

What will we do:

- Strengthen support for **SGO carers**, including allowances, training, and practical help.
- Increase capacity for **connected carers assessments**.
- Expand use of **in-house Supported Homes and Staying Put** arrangements.
- Continue strategic collaboration to secure **housing for care leavers**, including more single-person tenancies for those ready to live independently post-18.
- Improve **pathway planning and life-skills preparation**, ensuring more young people are independence-ready from age 16.
- Increase the **timeliness of Home Choice applications** and reduce waiting times for suitable accommodation.
- Maintain **multi-disciplinary oversight groups** to plan and track housing outcomes for care leavers.
- Continue providing **high-quality supported accommodation** for young refugees.

New and Emerging Challenges to consider

- Rapid increase in children being brought into care
- Increase in large family groups being brought into care
- Average age of children coming into care increasing
- Gaps in system prior to involvement in criminal justice system. Preventative services to be further developed
- Challenges with multi agency support and services for young people in crisis that involve high level Mental Health and or Behavioural issues
- Lack of secure and specialist placements especially in Medway and the Southeast
- Placement of children in care in Medway by other LA's– There are a significant number of children and families (400 plus) that continue to be placed in Medway by other LAs meaning challenges not just on homes but on all local services
- Changes to school funding arrangements OOA mean delays in suitable provision being identified for many CiC and often LA have to put in extra support and money to fill this gap.
- Changes to ICB structures and people will happen from April 26 and could impact funding and support for our most vulnerable children and young people
- Significant legislative changes including Children's Services reform bill.
- Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) Details of which won't be available until Summer 2026 but will be the biggest ever change to local government.
- Increasing numbers of Refugee children (unaccompanied children asylum seekers)
- Significant delays in autism and ADHD diagnosis for children

Overall, Areas of Development and Priorities

- Dedicated high quality Local Parent and Child provision
- Specialist Services to support prevention of young people being involved in criminality and provision to those on the fringes of the criminal Justice system
- Increased focus on prevention and reducing families entering the care system
- Increase the pool of internal foster carers with a focus on carers that are able to provide homes for adolescents
- To open Aut Evan and provide more local provision for young people with Learning Disabilities and Autism and for 16+

Monitoring Delivery of the Strategy

The progress of this strategy is monitored and tracked by Children's Services Management Team and will have an annual review meeting involving partners to ensure any new priorities are captured and oversee the development against the areas of focus.

A working group chaired by the Head of Commissioning and involving key stakeholders will meet quarterly and will report to CSMT and a wider update will be given to CADMT and Overview and Scrutiny to update progress and barriers.

Any inspection outcomes will further help form and shape the strategy.

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