

From: Christine Palmer, Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services

Christine McInnes, Interim Corporate Director for Children, Young People and Education

To: Children, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee – 17 March 2026

Subject: Young Carers – Commissioning of a new contract

Key decision Overall service value exceeds £1m and/or affects more than two Electoral Divisions.

Classification: Unrestricted

Past Pathway of report: N/A

Future Pathway of report: N/A

Electoral Division: All

Summary:

This report provides the Children, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee of the need to recommission a new Young Carers Support Service as the current contract ends on 30 April 2027.

Recommendation(s):

The Children, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee is asked to CONSIDER and ENDORSE or MAKE RECOMMENDATIONS to the Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services on the proposed decision as set out in the Proposed Record of Decision.

1. Background

- 1.1. A Young Carers Support Service has been in place since at least 2013, with a fully commissioned service operating continuously since 2016. The current contract was competitively tendered in 2021/2022 with the service, delivered by Imago, commencing 1 May 2022. This contract was for an initial term of three years and has used its two one-year extensions, with the service coming to an end on 30 April 2027.
- 1.2. The Young Carers Support Service comprises two distinct elements: workforce development; and direct support for children and young people. It has an annual contract value of £322k, with a total value over the five years of £1.61m.
- 1.3. A decision on the approach is required to allow for a full commissioning and procurement process to be undertaken to ensure that mobilisation of the contract is seamless between the existing service provider and a new provider.

- 1.4. Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) will cut across the contract term, therefore it is proposed that the contract should be awarded for a maximum term (four years, plus two years, plus two years) and with terms included to disaggregate the contract on a geographical basis and early termination, should that be required.

2. Introduction

- 2.1. A young carer is someone aged under 18 who helps look after a relative with a disability, illness, mental health condition, or drug or alcohol problem. A young carer usually looks after their parent(s), or cares for a brother or sister, however the term is not limited to those individuals.
- 2.2. The Children and Families Act, specifically Section 96¹, requires that young carers receive an assessment of their support needs, and that this assessment is repeated whenever those needs change. The assessment must consider whether the young carer is taking part in, or wishes to take part in, education, training or recreation, along with the extent and impact of the caring responsibilities they carry.
- 2.3. A Local Authority must take reasonable steps to identify those children in its area who are young carers and to establish whether they need support. Where it appears that a young carer may have support needs, the authority must carry out a proportionate and appropriate Young Carer's Needs Assessment.
- 2.4. KCC offers a comprehensive Young Carers Support Service, currently delivered by Imago, providing a lifeline of support for children and young people who balance everyday life with the demands of caring.
- 2.5. Caring responsibilities can have a profound effect on a child's health, education and overall development. Many young carers face social isolation and reduced school attendance, and some struggle to keep up academically, with many feel caught between loyalty to their family and the natural desire to have their own needs recognised and supported.
- 2.6. There are currently 9,680 young carers registered with the service. Statistically, young carers are more likely to be girls with 56% of the current children seen by Imago identifying as female. 86% of the children identify as white British, with 14% identifying as from a minority background. 53% of young carers care for an adult in their families (76% of adults cared for are mothers) with 47% caring for a sibling. Detailed Demographic data is provided at Appendix 1.
- 2.7. There are expected to be over 10,000 young carers in Kent, however, many young carers remain hidden from services. KCC needs to identify and support young carers and ensure that all services are more 'carer aware'. Research by

¹ [Children and Families Act 2014](#)

Action for Children and Nottingham University² estimates that 90% of young carers are currently 'hidden' and are missing out on vital support.

- 2.8. The Children and Families Act 2014³ gives every young carer a right to an assessment that must consider the impact on their education, wellbeing, and life chances, with the explicit test of whether it is appropriate for the child to provide care. We need to work more closely with Adult Social Care practitioners to make sure that children are not named nor relied upon as protective factors when assessing an adult's social care or health needs.
- 2.9. One change, as part of the new Specification development, will be for all children under secondary school age, who are assessed as being young carers, to be referred to the KCC Front Door in order to ensure that there are no safeguarding concerns and that their health, general wellbeing and school attendance is not being impacted by their caring role. Currently 23% of Kents 9,680 young carers are under the age of 11. The demographic data at Appendix 1 shows this in more detail.
- 2.10. The Specification will include clear age-based criteria for Front Door referrals. This will not only to reduce or remove inappropriate caring tasks (for example personal care, lifting or administering medication), it will also operate under a whole-family approach, triggering joint consideration of support for the adult or sibling with needs, so that necessary services to the cared-for person are in place and a caring responsibility is not placed onto a child.
- 2.11. The workforce development element of the existing service is non-statutory and, therefore, this element will not form part of the new service. This change prevents expansion of the budget while prioritising core, legally required support for young carers.

3. Proposed Model and inclusion of child voice

- 3.1. The intention is to co-design the model with practitioners, partners, and families.
- 3.2. Engaging young carers in the design of the Service Specification is critical to ensuring the new provision meets current and emerging needs. The focus will be on capturing lived experiences from a diverse range of young carers, including underrepresented groups and existing known young carers who access the service, translating these insights into practical service requirements.
- 3.3. Time has been allocated through the procurement to ensure that the voice of the child is fully embedded in the Specification. Building these steps into the timeline avoids rushed design and reduces the risk of commissioning a service that fails to meet statutory duties or expectations.

² [Action for Children - Hidden Young Carers](#)

³ [Children and Families Act 2014](#)

- 3.4. By embedding engagement early, the procurement will be informed by robust, young carer-led evidence, strengthening provider bids and ensuring Social Value commitments align with what young carers need. Engagement will include partnering with schools, Family Hubs, existing carers networks via social media and other relevant groups.
- 3.5. Specific delivery of the service is yet to be designed and the content of what this could look like will be developed as part of the engagement, however the statutory assessments will remain.

4. Other Local Authorities approach to Young Carers provision

- 4.1. The statutory responsibility for delivering Young Carer assessments is carried out in different ways across the country. Commissioners have contacted other Local Authorities to understand different approaches to provision (a full breakdown of this can be found in Appendix 2). This work has informed the commissioning approach for the new model.

5. Options considered and associated risk

- 5.1. Options considered for the delivery of a young carers service included
 1. Do nothing – Allow current contract to lapse – this was discounted due to the statutory nature of the service
 2. Create a new in-house model – this was discounted due to the increased costs of service delivery
 3. Externally commission a new Young Carers Service - this is the preferred option

A full breakdown of options, risks and mitigations can be found in Appendix 3.

6. Timeline

- 6.1. The table below details the timeline to support activity of an externally commissioned young carers service to commence 1 May 2027

Activity	Date
Specification development	April to July 2026
Commercial and Procurement Oversight Board (CPOB)	September 2026
Invitation to Tender issued	September 2026
Clarification and Evaluation	November 2026
Award contract	Late December 2026
Mobilisation	January 2027
Contract start date	1 May 2027

7. Legal Implications

- 7.1. Legal advice will be sought to ensure that any contractual and commercial risks are identified at the earliest opportunity.

- 7.2. The procurement of this service will be undertaken in accordance with the requirements of the Procurement Act 2023, with the expected route being a Competitive Flexible Procedure. This gives the ability to select a provider based on a detailed criteria (e.g. quality, social value, child outcomes etc). This ensures best value while enabling conversations on delivery models, innovation, and Social Value (e.g. additional funding streams leveraged).
- 7.3. Section 17ZA of the Children Act 1989, as amended by the Children and Families Act 2014, legislates that Local Authorities must assess whether a young carer within their area has needs for support and, if so, what those needs are, if;
 - it appears to the authority that the young carer may have need for support, or
 - the authority receive a request from the young carer or a parent of the young carer to assess the young carer's needs for support.
- 7.4. Relevant legal advice will be sought in relation to the appropriate contract terms and tender documentation to use with the procurement and application of TUPE which is considered likely to be required.
- 7.5. The impact of Local Government Reorganisation will be considered as part of the contract.

8. Financial Implications

- 8.1. KCC currently funds the Young Carers Support Service at £322k per annum. This is included within the key service line "Early Help and Preventative services". This is a revenue cost to the General Fund. As a statutory requirement under the Children and Families Act, this line is also committed in the 2026/2027 budget for ongoing provision.
- 8.2. The budget has remained the same since 2016. As the cost of living has increased, along with the cost of delivery, Commissioners will look to develop the Specification to maximise the budget, by considering the inclusion of innovative digital options for training and/or delivery. This will be developed in reflection of the voice of children who use the provision. In addition to this, efforts will also be made to meaningfully engage those young carers who do not use current provision to better understand the reasons for this.
- 8.3. In order to attract providers to the procurement and provision, a discretionary consideration of inflation has been built into the budget for the life of the contract. This has been included in the proposed Medium Term Financial Plan 2026/2029, as part of the "provision for price negotiations with external providers (Integrated Children's Services Operations)".
- 8.4. The new contract is proposed to be for four years plus two, two year extensions. With an annual budget allowance commencing at £330k per annum, and with the discretionary inflation increase built in, the total contract value for the eight years would be £2.85m.

9. Equalities implications

- 9.1. An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) has been completed. The EqIA has not identified any negative impacts. The new model will offer new and improved service access to protected groups.

10. Data Protection Implications

- 10.1. The successful provider will be required to sign up to the Kent and Medway Information Sharing Agreement as part of the contract. Secure methods of returning data will be agreed. A DPIA screening will be undertaken and the full DPIA will be completed once a provider is identified.

11. Other corporate implications

- 11.1. This proposal aligns to Aim 3 of Reforming Kent⁴ 2025-2028 “Supporting residents that need help.”

12. Governance

- 12.1. This service sits under the responsibility of the Director for Operational Integrated Children’s Services within the Children, Young People and Education Directorate.
- 12.2. The decision seeks approval for the commissioning of a new Young Carers Service to begin on 1 May 2027, replacing the existing contract which ends on 30 April 2027
- 12.3. This decision delegates authority to the Corporate Director of Children, Young People and Education, to take the necessary actions to give effect to the decision. In addition, authority is delegated to the Corporate Director of Children, Young People and Education, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills, to exercise the contract extension options as permitted under the agreed contract terms

13. Conclusions

- 13.1. This proposal allows KCC to continue to meet its statutory duty to identify and support young carers. The new contract will allow the service to evolve in line with the lived experience of children and their families whilst maintaining continuity of support.
- 13.2. The future model will be co-designed with young carers, practitioners and partners so that it reflects current needs and makes the best use of the available budget. This includes exploring more innovative delivery options and

⁴ [Reforming Kent2025-2028](#)

strengthening links with Adult Social Care to reduce inappropriate caring and embed a whole family approach.

Recommendation(s):

The Children, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee is asked to **CONSIDER** and **ENDORSE** or **MAKE RECOMMENDATIONS** to the Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services on the proposal set out in the Proposed Record of Decision.

14. Appendices

- Young Carers Demographic Information (Appendix 1)
 - Local Authority approaches to the statutory responsibility for young carers provision (Appendix 2)
 - Procurement approach Options Table (Appendix 3)
 - Proposed Record of Decision
 - Equality Impact Assessment
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15. Contact details

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