

**FOSTER
FOR
KENT**

Adoption
Partnership
South East



**Corporate Parenting
Annual Report
2023 – 2024**



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Message from the Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services: Sue Chandler



Welcome to the Corporate Parenting Annual Report 2024 which highlights the work of the Corporate Parenting Panel and our services to children in care.

As the Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services, I strongly support and endorse the work of the Panel. Officers, elected Members and partners play an important role, providing the best possible care and safeguarding for the children and young people who are looked after by Kent County Council.

Many of the children and young people in our care have faced challenges in their early life and all members of the Corporate Parenting Panel share the ambition that they get the best possible support to go on to live happy and successful lives. I am proud of all our young people, and it is a privilege to work with them.

I would like to thank the Officers, Members and especially our young people for their contribution to the work of the Panel.

Message from the Assistant Director for Corporate Parenting: Caroline Smith

It is with great pleasure that I introduce our 2024 annual report for the corporate parenting services at Kent County Council.



Kent County Council have joined other Local Authorities to work together to address the national challenge of a shortage of foster carers and other types of care provision for children. The Social Care Review will see national changes to the way children in care are supported and Kent have successfully applied for a number of Department of Education grants to develop our Corporate Parenting services.

I am very proud of the 1950 children and young people in our care and the 2,004 young adults who are care experienced. During 2024, Kent has seen a further increase in the numbers of new arrivals of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and our services are continually adapting to manage this demand.

Over the last year, it has been an absolute privilege to join the services to celebrate children, young people, and our staff's achievements at a variety of activity days, award ceremonies, conferences and service days.

We continue to be aspirational for our children and young people and support them in every way we can, to be the best corporate parents we can be.

About Us

The government introduced clear corporate parenting principles that requires all departments within a local authority, including staff, elected members and partner agencies; to recognise their role as a corporate parent and encourage them to look at the support and services they provide.

Kent County Council (KCC) works to be the best corporate parent to our children and young people by following these key principles:

- To act in the best interest and promote the physical, mental health and wellbeing of those children and young people.
- To encourage those children and young people to express their views, wishes and feelings.
- To consider the views, wishes and feelings of those children and young people.
- To help those children and young people to gain access to, and make the best use of, the services provided by the local authority and its relevant partners.
- To promote high aspirations and seek to secure the best outcomes for those children and young people.
- To ensure those children and young people are safe and have stability in their home lives, relationships, education, and workplace.
- To prepare those children and young people for adulthood and independent living.

Our corporate parenting panel and corporate parenting services are overseen by the Assistant Director for Corporate Parenting, Caroline Smith, and comprise of four key services: Kent Fostering, Adoption Partnership Southeast (APSE), Total Placement Service (TPS), and 18+ Care Leavers Service.

The services form part of the overall countywide services for children and young people, reporting to the Director for Children's Countywide Services, Kevin Kasaven. Corporate parenting works closely with Virtual School Kent (VSK), children's early help and social work, health, education, youth offending and our key partners including the Young Lives Foundation (YLF) and Kent Association of Foster Carers (KAFC).

Our services report into the corporate parenting panel who meet six times per year and, alongside elected members and staff officers, the panel has a wide range of independent members including foster carers, the designated nurse for children in care, Chair of Kent Housing Group and YLF.

Following a previous challenge that children and young people wanted to attend panel without having to miss out on their education, we ensure some panel dates are planned around school holidays to facilitate this. In July 2024, the panel held its second Corporate Parenting Takeover event in the council chambers where children and young people co-chaired/presented all agenda items. There is the option to join the panel virtually, to encourage wider attendance and participation. The voice of our children and young people is represented at all panels by our VSK apprentices and participation workers.

Members of the panel are invited to attend celebration events, award ceremonies and activity days to meet the children and young people for whom they are a corporate parent. In 2024, we have held a wide variety of events, to celebrate our children and young people's achievements. Each corporate parenting panel includes a cabinet member update.

Performance Scorecard

The performance scorecard is presented regularly to enable the panel to monitor key targets and statutory requirements. For 2024, targets have in the majority been maintained within an amber or green rating across the key performance indicators. However, the increased numbers of new arrivals of unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, has significantly impacted upon three areas, where performance is within the red, below the required target.

- The health target for completion of the initial health assessment within the statutory timescale, is below the required target due to the numbers of new children arriving.
- The increased numbers of new arrivals of unaccompanied children under the age of 16, needing to be placed with foster carers has impacted upon availability for local children to be placed within 20 miles of their local community. This will be addressed, with the planned opening of new unaccompanied children's residential homes, supported accommodation and safe care centres, which will ease the pressure on fostering provision, with an anticipated improvement for this target by the end of 2024.
- The increase in unaccompanied asylum young adults transferring into the 18+ Care Leavers service, without confirmed immigration status has impacted on our performance of young adults within education, training or employment (ETE). Without status, young unaccompanied adults are unable to legally work and during 2024, the availability of ESOL education courses has reduced meaning performance in this area has been impacted. The service have two specialist ETE workers who are focusing on improvement in this area, alongside working closely with the Home Office to address the back log of asylum applications for care leavers.



Virtual School Kent's Participation and Engagement Team

We have continued to work to provide opportunities for children and young people, who are in receipt of services from social care, to help empower them, and to have their views and opinions heard and acted upon within their individual care planning, and to help make positive changes to service design and delivery. The team have worked over the past year to ensure that there is a wide range of engagement and participatory opportunities available to children and young people who come under the umbrella of corporate parenting.

The team currently includes six apprentices, who have lived experience of being in care, fostering or adoption. They are working towards level two and three qualifications and are supported to be successful by a team of participation officers. In the last year, we have promoted care experienced members of the team who originally joined the team as level two apprentices, these team members have successfully completed qualifications and have worked hard to attain permanent roles in the team. The personal experience of Children's Social Services within the team brings a unique point of view and enormous amount of knowledge, as the lived experience that team members have themselves ensures that the team works in an inclusive and empathic way when working with and supporting children and young people.

About Our Councils

Our team has focused on making our council groups for children and young people as accessible as possible, as we recognise that not everyone is able or wants to travel to attend our main meetings in person. We feel that in order to appeal to as wide a range as possible of young people, it is important we offer different ways for children and young people to feel included and share their views, opinions and experiences.

All of our councils now offer a range of opportunities for young people to engage if they are not able or want to attend the main meetings, and we have embedded a 'we will come to you in a way that suits you' approach to our engagement work. In the meeting cycles, in addition to running our main meetings, children and young people have met with members of the team on an individual or small group basis, both in person and virtually. This approach has been received really positively by young people, children and their parents and foster carers. We can evidence that we have a wider network of young people who are engaging with us.

Our Councils

- The Young Adult Council (YAC) is for care experienced young people aged 16-25-years-old.
- The Young Adult Council Extra (YACE) for unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people aged 16-25-years-old.
- Our Children and Young People's Council (OCYPC) is for young people in care aged 11-16-years-old.
- Our Children and Young Peoples Council Extra (OCYPCE) is an outreach group for care experienced young people aged 7-16-years-old who are unable to make the main meetings.
- The Super Council is for Children in Care aged 7-11-years-old.
- The Adoptables is for adopted young people aged 11-18-years-old.
- The Young Persons Reference Group (YPRC) is for adopted young people aged 16+.
- Children Who Care (CWC) for the sons and daughters of foster carers aged 7+.
- Our Children and Young Peoples Council making a great and important change (OCYPC MAGIC) is for young people with special educational needs (SEND) and disabilities (adopted, in care or with a social worker) aged 11-18-years-old.

The Young Adult Council and Young Adult Council Extra

YAC has continued to develop with members meeting monthly in Maidstone and Ashford. They have discussed a variety of topics and agenda items including:

- Visits from local universities and discussions about going to university and answering any questions they had in regard to finance and the support they can receive due to their status as a care leaver.
- Meeting with the heads of 18+ care leavers service and looking at changes made to their local offer, also looking at the future of communications with young people, creating a new app and making information clearer, and young person friendly.
- Looking at the step up to social work programme and the job roles of children's social workers and personal advisers.
- Planning activities that give back to the community. The YAC have been looking at supporting homeless charities and have been practising their cooking skills to support the Maidstone day centre, who provide homeless people with hot meals and a place to wash their clothes. They attended a day to prepare, cook and serve food for people who attend the centre.
- At our YACE meeting, we have had guests attend from the YLF to discuss advocacy and the unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people specialist independent review officers attend our meetings.
- YACE were involved in planning the unaccompanied asylum-seeking childrens conference for adults working with young people in January at Dover Castle and made a video sharing what is working well for them and the challenges they sometimes face.¹
- They have also discussed the availability of local amenities, how easy it was for young people to get to know their local area, are they able to find the shops, places of worship and leisure activities that they needed.



Super Council, Our Children and Young Peoples Council and Our Children and Young Peoples Council Extra



This has been a successful year for the super council, OCYPC and OCYPCE and we are incredibly proud of the members for all of their hard work, commitment and positivity.

In total, a large number of children have regularly attended one of the three groups, or contributed in a way that suits them, whether this is virtually online or in person 1-1 at their home. We have been pleased that by being more creative in how young people can be part of the groups, we have enabled some young people to join the children in care councils who otherwise would not have attended a group meeting in real life.

This year, the three groups have discussed several topics including:

- How their workers can encourage positive relationships between themselves and their young people, as well as between young people and their friends and family. Feedback for this was shared with Coram Voice, as part of their engagement work with children in care on behalf of the Department of Education (DfE), as well as informing this year's planning of sessions for university students studying to become social workers.
- What young people in care would want from careers fayres alongside the strategic careers hub lead from the Kent and Medway careers hub; in particular they discussed the social care sector.
- Fostering to help ensure that children's views and opinions are included in some of the changes that are taking place in the service including the development of the regional hub to support initial enquiries of potential new foster carers and the mockingbird programme. Group members discussed what an ideal foster carer should be like and what qualities they should have. This

¹ <https://youtu.be/9-Yn2dtBx0w?si=e20p1qOpAAC9JIG2>

was also shared, alongside the work of other children in care councils at the launch event in Bracknell in July 2024.

- The support they feel young people need at school, particularly those whose attendance is low, to learn and feel happy, safe and like they belong. Young people discussed what they feel teachers and other school, or college staff need to know about supporting children in care in school, the assumptions that professionals can make about them and the strategies and resources they feel would be useful. This feedback was used in 3 ways - by the VSK advisory team who have produced a guide for schools around belonging; by Become, the national charity for children in care and care leavers, who are working with young people across the country to produce a film for educational professionals focussed on supporting young people in care in school, and by our own team who presented to over 100 2nd year primary teaching students at Canterbury Christ Church University on the topic of supporting young people in care at school in early May 2024.

In addition, some members of the children in care councils have contributed to an online focus group with Coram Voice and Ofsted, around the Big Listen Campaign, co-produced a film and training sessions called 'Listen Up!' about the importance of workers really listening to their young people and supported the social care awards judging panels.

Children Who Care

Members of CWC, a group for the children of foster carers, started the year by looking at what fostering means to them. Members looked at the importance of their role within a fostering family, as well as the positives of welcoming young people into their home.

In October 2023 they were asked for their feedback around the new mockingbird programme. The scheme has been adopted by KCC and aims to replicate the support available through an extended family network. Members expressed their thoughts and feelings about how this can be rolled out successfully to all of our fostering families.

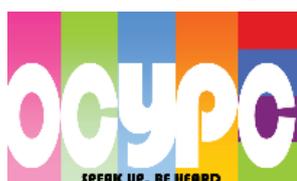
Members also took part in contributing to a new attendance guide, written by the VSK advisory team. The council provided feedback about what it's like to be part of a fostering family and looked at who they feel should know about their home life. Members spoke about what it feels like to 'belong' in school.

Earlier this year, CWC looked at what they thought were important qualities of being a good foster carer and celebrating their parents' roles. Young people's views have been sent to the fostering service and a project delivery manager responsible for delivering the regional fostering hub. These will be incorporated in a document shared with enquiry officers and people at the early stages of their fostering journey so they know from the very beginning what young people need from them which should support them to become better carers.

The Adoptables

Our well established Adoptables group have had a successful year, being involved in several projects, supporting the APSE and VSK.

In October 2023, members were asked for their help to provide feedback around approval and matching panels, ensuring the process focuses on the child's perspective as well as potential adopters. In February, the Adoptables wrote and produced a short film about their aspirations and hope for the future. The film was made in the lovely setting of the big cat sanctuary and is now available for professionals to watch to help promote how they can support young people achieve their future aspirations. In March 2024, representatives from the Adoptables were invited to attend the APSE board meeting. Members wanted to discuss what information and support was available for adopted young people. This resulted in a new children's guide to adoption being made. which



the Adoptables co-produced with APSE. This is now available on the APSE website, where young people can find support and guidance.

This year members contributed to a new guide to promoting attendance in schools. This was compiled by the VSK advisory team. The Adoptables provide their insight as to what made school a nice place to be, and any improvements that teachers and professionals could do to support and increase attendance in school.

Our Children and Young People's Council MAGIC

OCYPC MAGIC is our newest council group and has been running a year. It is open to children who are SEND, aged 11-18-years-old who are in care, adopted young people and children with a social worker.

Within our council group meetings, we have been working on the project 'This is Me'. The children have shared their likes, dislikes and what triggers certain emotions in them. They were lucky enough to have one of their meetings at the big cat sanctuary! Before having the exciting tour of the sanctuary, they discussed their top tips that they would give to professionals on the subject of transitioning between primary to secondary school and onto college and further employment.

They designed their own PowerPoint slides outlining the challenges they face at school and in society and what helps them succeed. During our last meeting the children spoke about what makes them amazing, reflected on what helps them grow, flourish and shared what they would like to be like in 5 years' time. We used the children's feedback to contribute towards a 'This is Me' video which was shared and celebrated at the corporate parenting panel take over day.²

All our meetings always have a great fun factor element to them, with us playing games, having access to sensory areas and doing an arty or practical activity. We have done planting, pottery painting, easter crafts and games, a chocolate making workshop and the big cat sanctuary. We are looking forward to going to Faversham community centre in October 2024 to do pizza making and to use their entertainment room.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yMdFFRUd7Mg>

Council Memberships for our children and young people

Super council

13

OCYPC

32

YAC

20

YACE

14

CWC

13

Adoptables and reference group

18

OCYPC MAGIC

19

Total = 129



Activity Days

Our participation activity days continue to be popular with children and young people. Face to face participation activity days and events have been run throughout the school holidays for children in care, the children of foster carers and adopted young people.

Children come to the days to socialise and make friends, meet other children who are in similar situations to them, and try out something new that they may not have done before. The days are also opportunities for our participation team to meet children in a relaxed environment and speak to them about the work of the team, explain how they can get involved if they would like to by joining councils or focus groups and how they can help make positive changes for other young people.

During the last 12-months, our participation team have run 26 activity days for children in care and the sons and daughters of foster carers. They have also organised a further 12 in person activity days for adopted children. This is in addition to 2 Christmas parties and 2 bespoke events for children with SEND.

The range of activities on offer have been wide in order to appeal to as many children and young people as possible and also to fulfil requests from them to run activities that they particularly enjoy or have never tried before. Activities have included horse riding, a range of sporting activities including water sports and outdoor pursuits, arts and craft workshops, and visits to animal parks including the big cat sanctuary which was an extremely positive experience for many children.



Feedback from social workers, foster carers and parents

"We know how much careful thought, organization and support must have gone into managing today so successfully, thank you so much for all of your hard work. It was a lovely, memorable day for them to be able to experience together. Thank you all again."

"Well done to you all for another amazing event, this was my second one I have attended, and I look forward to more in the future. Thank you for offering these events to our young people, I know how much they gain from them and look forward to the next one."

"He has created an amazing piece of art work and a write up about his journey for refugee week, he also allowed it to be used in training events to share the lived UASC experience and prompt empathy and positive engagement, he has offered to create more pieces of writing if it helps promote positive interest."

Ju" just wanted to say thank you so much for a lovely day today. Both xxx and xxx had a wonderful time and came out so happy and animated about everything they'd done. They both said it was 'super fun' and when I asked what the best bit was they said 'everything!!!'. I can't believe how many fabulous activities you squeezed into one day."

"I just wanted to say a huge thank you from xxx and myself for the wonderful two participation activity days she attended yesterday and Friday. She had a great time. These days really help her with her wellbeing and feeling safe in an environment that she feels accepted so thank you."

"After working very hard and achieving astounding GCSE results, he has successfully made the transition to college where he is completing a Level 3 course in engineering."

"She has been working part-time towards a Social Work Apprenticeship whilst working as a Support Worker with vulnerable adults. She has been working in a difficult and sometimes challenging environment while also focusing on her own studies."



For several years, our apprentices and other members of the team with lived experience have taken part in presentations and training sessions with student social workers at both the University of Kent and Canterbury Christ Church University sharing both their own experiences and advice alongside that of the young people we work with.

This year, we have sought to develop this work and have met with second year children's nursing students and nursing associate students at Christ Church and second year medical students at the Kent and Medway Medical School.

During the sessions, members of the team challenged students to consider their assumptions about care experienced young people and any misconceptions they held, sought to develop their understanding of what being in care means and shared some key themes around health care and care experience. They were also able to share some of our YAC members' own experiences of seeking health care support and what they, as care experienced young people, needed from health care professionals.

Events for Children with SEND

Steph Storer, Course Director for the Nurse Associate Programme at CCCU - *"All our students enjoyed yesterday's session so much, so a big thank you to you and the team. The presentation and the confidence of your care leavers was superb. You left us with a lot to consider and because you were able to speak from experience our students will always remember it. A big thank you to you and please come again."*

The team ran an easter sensory event for children who come under the strengthening independence service and their families, and for SEND children in care. We had 19 children attend along with their wider family.

The team prepared lots of easter themed sensory activities that met the children's needs and captured their interest perfectly! After lunch we enjoyed a show performed by Head2Head Sensory Theatre Company that engaged the children. They signed Makaton throughout the show and passed out sensory bags to encourage participation and interaction.

Another event was held in the summer holidays at Yew Tree Farm and Bredgar railway. 39 children and their families attended the day along with a picnic lunch. There were lots of accessible arts and crafts activities available, alongside a party entertainer plus lots of opportunities to see the animals on the farm. To finish the day everyone was able to have a ride on the steam train.

Launch of Local Authority Fostering Southeast

Our apprentices contributed to the launch of the DfE funded initiative to work towards more Southeast children being fostered in the region. They attended the event and spoke about their own experiences of fostering and how previous foster carers have had a such a positive impact in their lives.

Speak Up Sessions

Something that is very important to the team is ensuring that we support children's individual participation, so as well as the collective participation at our councils, we offer speak up sessions. We offer support to help them to express themselves and share their own views, wishes and experiences.

This 1-1 work is intended as a way for young people to get their voices heard and shared with the people who matter to them. Our team are there to help promote the child or young person's voice

and provide a means of amplifying what they want to say. This can be in a format of their choice such as a short, animated video, poster, presentation, photo book or leaflet, and are worked on over a period of approximately six weeks.

This work is proving very popular, and members of the team are booking in sessions with children after school on a weekly short-term basis. Children are producing a range of work in a way that want to share their experiences with their workers, teachers and foster carers.

Corporate Parenting Events organised by our participation and engagement team

Christmas Parties

Christmas parties held in December 2023 were a big success. 30 families attended the children in care Christmas party, and 62 families attended the adoption Christmas party. It was great to see so many children and their families coming together to take part in festive games and activities to enjoy the holiday season. There were some lovely crafts to take home as a reminder of the day – reindeer food, handprints, tree decorations. As well as crafts, there were many entertaining stall games for everyone to participate in. And of course, the children had the opportunity to see Santa in Santa's grotto and receive a lovely Christmas gift from him.

"A HUGE thank you for the amazing adoption Christmas party. Our girls loved it. The craft tables were a huge hit, and the games so much fun. Such a lot of fun and a lot of effort from your team. I'm sure all the children loved it. Thank you for all that you do."

Christmas Show

Just a few days before Christmas we held our 'VSK Christmas show in a day'. In the morning the children (children in care, children of foster carers and adopted children) came along to practise and learn some Christmas songs and routines that they were all going to be performing later that afternoon. Parents, carers, KCC staff and elected members were able to come along and watch the performance in the afternoon. We were also lucky enough to have some fantastic young people execute some solo performances on stage too.

The feedback from the children, parents and carers was that they had great fun getting in the Christmas spirit. They also said that for a lot of them it was a rare chance to feel that they were in the spotlight and had their moment to shine. We also did not miss the opportunity to involve their corporate parents, including the Chairman of KCC, Gary Cooke and Chairman of Corporate Parenting Panel, Dirk Ross, who went head-to-head with Assistant Director for Corporate Parenting, Caroline Smith, and Headteacher for VSK, Tony Doran, in some silly Christmas games up on the stage with Santa and the Grinch!

Adoption Partnership Southeast Family Picnic

Our annual summer picnic for adopted children took place in July 2024. Lots of children attended the day along with their extended family, so it was a great occasion for them to spend a fun day together. They were a wide of games and sensory activities to take part in alongside a party entertainer.

Corporate Parenting Panel Takeover Day

In July 2024, representatives from our young people's councils took over the corporate parenting panel in the council chambers at sessions house. Members from our children in care councils: the

Super Council, OCYPC and YAC joined up with children from our OCYPC MAGIC, Adoptables and CWC councils.

The aim of the day was to give children and young people in care, care leavers, adopted young people and the children of our foster carers the chance to be involved in the meeting, have a say and speak about their lives to their corporate parents. Each young person had the opportunity to shadow KCC directors, senior officers and elected members.

Children and young people had the opportunity to tell the panel members about the value of their council groups, why they attend and about the benefits they bring to them and other young people. The way reports were presented with young people first giving an account of their lived experience made it feel like the reports held more context and inspired a different way of considering the evidence.

They also worked to prepare a workshop entitled 'Listen Up' which aims to emphasise the importance of all professionals listening to the children and young people they work with. The 'Listen Up' workshop was debuted to the corporate parenting panel members and presented by the young people who wrote it. The workshop was enthusiastically received by the panel and will be rolled out to other services in the autumn.

Our OCYPC MAGIC members, also produced a film to share called 'This is Me' which celebrated and showcased the work of their council for their first anniversary.

Award Celebration

The participation team has supported VSK in planning two award celebrations this year, one event for our children in care which is due to take place in September 2024, and one for post-16 and care leavers. The post-16 award celebration took place on an evening in July was full of good food, lots of award presentations alongside a vintage funfair and garden games.

The awards celebrated the academic achievements of young people plus their wider achievements of note in the community. We received 278 nominations that with 115 young people attending the celebration along with their foster carers, social workers or personal advisers.

The evening was a great opportunity for senior staff and our county councillors, to hear many of the amazing things that our young people are doing. The reasons for their nominations were inspiring to everyone present.

Event Photography

Christmas Show



Adoption Partnership Southeast Family Picnic



Corporate Parenting Panel Takeover Day



Award Celebration



Continued...



Young Peoples Councils



OCYPC MAGIC



Activity Days



Children with SEND



Launch of Local Authority Fostering Southeast



Care Leavers 18+ Service

Our service operates from two office bases: Worrall House in West Malling and Thistly Hill in Dover. We continue to work closely with care experienced young people aged 18-25 years-old and have found new ways to support them during the last year. All staff are provided with the appropriate technology to achieve this, including laptops, remote access to KCC systems and smart phones and mobile working the hybrid model is firmly embedded.

Each of the 12-case holding teams, has a team manager who is responsible for one Senior Personal Advisor and seven Personal Advisers with the exception of our post-22+ team that has two Senior Personal Advisors. All of our team managers are permanent members of staff and are qualified social workers. Our service continues to work as one integrated service under the two heads of service (HoS) and two service managers. This integrated approach ensures that all care experienced young people can expect the same support wherever they happen to live in the county and those who live out of county.

We currently support 1,869³ young people aged 18-25-years-old. An additional 129 care experienced young people are supported in other services, including Adult Services and Strengthening Independence service. We are expecting a further rise in the care leaver population in line with recent increases in our unaccompanied asylum-seeking children population and the reformulation of the national transfer scheme.

We have been successful in getting agreement for the care leavers covenant. More information can be found at [Care Leaver Covenant - GOV.UK](#).

What We Offer

Our service puts the needs of our care experienced young people at the heart of our practice to ensure a person-centred approach in the delivery of our responsibilities as corporate parents. Our service is delivered through personal advisers who are there to assist young people by providing advice, support, encouragement, and financial guidance in accessing housing, education, training, work experience and health services, supporting their successful transition to independence and adulthood and helping them to take every opportunity available to them.

³ Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children: 981 and non-unaccompanied asylum-seeking children: 895.

Performance for those young people our service is in touch with

As of July 2024, according to the last corporate parenting score card published on 6th August 2024

Young people our service are in touch with

Target

85%

Actual

78.6%

Young people in education, training or employment

Target

65%

Actual

55.5%

Young people in suitable accommodation

Target

90%

Actual

93%

Pathway plans to be upheld and reviewed every 6-months

Target

95%

Actual

90%



Developments and Initiatives

- Kent County Council signed up to the Care Leavers Covenant in March 2024.
- External funding to allow the development and continuation of specialist posts within the service. The rough sleeping grant is now called the Housing Pathways team and has been extended until 31st March 2025. Beyond this period, we are aiming for the team to be a permanent part of the service offered to young people.
- A project group is exploring the development of our digital offer including an updated website and a potential app.
- The service continues to strengthen our relationship with adult services to improve the transitional arrangements for young people turning 18-years-old who may have Care Act needs. Therefore, assessments are done in a timely manner by the establishment of a transitions panel that we are hoping will become a county wide approach. The transition process is being reviewed by external consultants.
- The service provides opportunities for two permanent apprenticeship posts.
- The Kent housing joint protocols have been updated and are now a stand-alone set of agreed protocols specifically for our care experienced young people. We are aiming to achieve all 12 district councils signing up to ratify the agreement.
- We have expanded the use of housing panels to look at collaborative planning in regard to the accommodation needs of care experienced young people. This is now expanded to 8 out of 12 district councils.
- Our reviewed Local Offer has now been published.
- We are working collaboratively with VSK and had a summer activity event at Mote Park on the 26th of June 2024.
- The service participated in a wider Kent unaccompanied asylum-seeking children networking forum which brings together national and local partners such as British Red Cross, Barnardos, Kent Refugee Action Network, YLF and many more.

Drop-in Service

Our drop-in service goes from strength to strength with seven separate locations across the county. We look to expand it further as part of staying connected with our young people and offering an opportunity to engage in an alternative way with the service to seek further advice and support from our personal advisers and specialist workers. Our care leaver apprentices also attend the drop-in sessions to offer support. Working in partnership with other organisations we have been able to offer drop-ins in local libraries, youth hubs and KCC social care buildings.

The main purposes of our drop-in services are:

- To offer networking opportunities for young people.
- To provide access to advice for education and careers for those who are not in education, training, or employment.
- To provide advice on access and entitlements to welfare benefits.
- To provide advice and support to move on to an independent affordable accommodation through their bespoke housing plan.
- To maintain constructive contact with our isolated and vulnerable young people.
- To promote re-engagement with care services.

Those Vulnerable to Homelessness

Based on the success of our practice initiatives, the DfE agreed further funding for the continuation of our housing options and advice team, also known as the housing pathways team, through the rough sleeping grant. Our housing pathways team have experienced some staffing issues, but we have now successfully recruited to the vacant posts. We have also launched our online tenancy

training programme to help care experience young people navigate and understand their housing and accommodation options.

Care Experienced Young People in Custody

Our custody co-ordinator has been appointed since 2019 and continues to remain the single point of contact with all key partners and offers support to the allocated personal advisers and team managers to ensure that robust needs assessment and pathway planning are formulated in a timely manner for young people who enter and leave custody. We regularly keep in touch with young people in custody and support them to meet their needs within the HM Prisons (HMP) as well as upon their release into the community; through joint working with key partner agencies such as the Probation Service, Police, housing, education and training providers, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Home Office's Immigration Service, prison in-reach mental health services and Community National Health Services. The use of video link facility continues to be utilised to stay in touch virtually with young people wherever possible in both HMP. There is a joint working protocol with early help for young people in the criminal justice system and guidance for our personal advisers working with young people in custody. Due to personal advisers and our custody co-ordinator attending release planning meetings, we are better able to plan for prison releases, ensuring young people have a suitable place to live, with support if required, claim their benefits, refer them to education, training and employment opportunities to reduce the chances of the young person re-offending due to not having these in place⁴.

Survey

In October and November 2023, an online survey was sent by text to the mobile phones of young people receiving our services. The survey was designed to understand service satisfaction and to identify areas where we could better support our young people. The survey has been run every October since 2018 and this report considers changing attitudes and opinions of young people over this period. There were 677 responses to the survey, which is a 36% response rate. Some of the key findings are the positive ratings of the 'overall experience' of the care leavers survey remained stable at 70% year-on-year, this has been an upward trend since 2018. 78% of young people surveyed in 2023 rated their relationship with their personal advisers as positive, a similar level to both the 2022 survey (78%) and the 2021 survey (79%).

Staff are trained to help young people understand the triple planning process for asylum so that they can understand the consequences of any negative decision regarding their asylum decision by the Home Office and are supported through these complexities.

Enhanced Support to Asylum-Seeking Young People

The number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people continues to grow, the service uses the information management system, Power BI, to monitor and review the immigration status of our unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people to help ensure those with limited leave to remain can apply for further leave to remain in good time, with the Home Office. The Illegal Migration Act 2024 has impacted upon a number of our unaccompanied young adults, with significant delays in their claims for asylum. In recognition of the specialist and additional needs that our unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people have, our two permanent asylum specialist social workers continued to lead and offer additional support to young people with an un-concluded immigration status to overcome this barrier to their journey to independence.

This is based on a shared recognition that unresolved immigration status is a key barrier for young people in planning for their independence by excluding them from education and employment

⁴ As of 31st October 2024, total 41 young people were in custody. Seven unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, 29 non-unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people and two EEA nationals.

opportunities and impacting their mental health. The social workers undertake various roles such as age assessments, human rights assessments, regular Home Office immigration checks, close oversight of young people's status on Liberi to prevent them from becoming overstayers, supporting the service with all queries related to asylum and immigration, providing internal and external training around asylum and triple planning and undertaking joint pathway plan assessments with personal advisers for young people with complex legal challenges.

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Young People Outreach Programme at Colleges in Kent

With the support and collaboration of Kent colleges, our specialist staff members have initiated a bespoke unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people outreach programme for the unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people at various Kent colleges. The outreach sessions are regularly delivered the service at Canterbury, Ashford, Folkestone, Dover and Gillingham. The aim of this outreach programme is to provide young people with an opportunity to meet with our specialists, engage and ask questions and receive advice regarding accommodation, education, immigration status, custody, benefits, etc, to promote community engagement and our service presences at various colleges to support unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people understand the meaning of triple pathway planning and to promote awareness of our local offer.

The unaccompanied asylum-seeking children outreach programme has provided an opportunity for those young people to see that our works in partnership with other agencies and stakeholders. The events have been attended by the DWP, VSK and organisations supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children such as Together South and Groundworks.

Vulnerable Young People and Suitability of Accommodation

There has been a continuation of our monthly high-cost placement panel to review the suitability of the accommodation and ensure cost effective use of resources and this continues to prove a valuable process in ensuring that placements are meeting the needs of young people and helping them move on in a constructive way and are value for money. In 2023, a policy change was agreed to offer accommodation for one year following the transfer of young people into the service, up until their 19th birthday. Since the start of our high-cost panels, we achieved a reduction in high-cost semi-independent placements. As of October 2024, we have no young adults in long-term high-cost placements.

Education, Training and Employment Event

We continue to try and develop our offer to young people. After the pledge event in April 2022, we were able to establish a training programme with partners Amey and Social Enterprise Kent, called the elevate programme, this has resulted in four young people successfully completing the course to be offered apprenticeships with Amey and we are hoping to repeat this success.

The elevate programme has expanded and we are about to launch our National Health Service elevate programme for young people in partnership between National Health staff, KCC and Social Enterprise Kent.

Care Leavers Summer Event

In June 2024, we hosted a care leavers summer event at Mote Park in Maidstone. This was supported by a number of partnering agencies including YLF, British Army and Goal 17; a care leavers mentoring service. There were a wide range of activities and sports for our young people to try ranging from tie dying, which was run by our colleagues from the participation team, to water sports including fishing and paddle boarding. The feedback we had from our young people was very

positive, with a number of them saying they had an opportunity to try something new. We hope to run this again in 2025.



Kent Supported Homes

In February 2021, we took over responsibility for running the supported lodgings scheme previously managed by Catch22. When this contract ended the service came in-house and we changed the name to Kent Supported Homes (KSH). A change of Ofsted regulations in October 2023, meant all supported accommodation for 16-17-year-olds were required to become regulated by Ofsted. In the Autumn of 2023, we registered with Ofsted as part of the compliance with the new regulatory framework. This required providing documentary evidence to Ofsted including producing a young person's handbook, a statement of purpose for the service and the required policies and procedures to comply with the regulatory framework. These procedures can be found on Kent procedures online (KPON). At the end of July 2024, we were notified that we would be receiving our registration visit from Ofsted, to complete the registration process. Caroline Smith, as the nominated individual and Mark Weinel, as the registered service manager were subject to a fit person interview. Registration was confirmed in October 2024. We will be launching our Step Across to KSH in October 2024 which is a pilot project to provide an alternative step down within a family environment for young people ready to move on from semi-independent or residential accommodation.

Foodbank Project

Our 18+ Foodbank Project was launched in April 2023 by a small group of personal advisors from the 18+ Care Leavers Service; the aim of the project is to support our care experienced young adults in times of need. The project works in collaboration with The Family Foodbank and The Hygiene Bank Medway to offer an in-house food and hygiene bank service to young people within the service and is available to all Kent care leavers.

In November 2024, our 18+ Foodbank Project won the **National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum Team of The Year Award!** The NLCBF noted that: *“The Kent team recognised and responded to the cost-of-living crisis, and so the 18+ Food Project was developed to support young people through this critically important time.”*



Kent Fostering Service

In April 2024 we successfully implemented a realignment of the service to include the Kinship Service providing support to, and the assessment of, kinship carers and special guardians. Extensive work on the development of a new fostering service began in the spring of 2023. The numbers of approved foster carers had been declining despite extensive recruitment activity in Kent. Over the previous three years, this has been compounded by the covid pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis which resulted in a further reduction in applications.

In addition, there was a need to support the children's social work teams to meet the agenda outlined in the Government document 'stable homes built on love' whilst also aiming to reduce the number of children becoming looked after and the subsequent need for expensive care provisions this caused. We therefore reviewed our existing staffing structure to help meet these challenges. Following a review of other local authority structures and practices, we based our structure on the Essex model of practice and learning from their implementation in 2022.

Our kinship assessment teams main function is the completion of viability and full assessments for:

- Kinship foster carers (connected persons Regulation 24 and 25).
- Special guardianship orders (SGO).
- Child arrangement orders.

Our kinship support teams include a team for the support of kinship foster carers and one for special guardians. Their roles include:

- Taking direct referrals from the front door from special guardians and professionals relating to children who are on an SGO, to offer support identified within existing SGO support plans.
- Taking kinship cases from early help teams where there is an active involvement of support to special guardians.
- Working with families who have an open referral to the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF) and oversight of maximising applications to the ASGSF.
- Providing supervision and support to kinship foster carers.
- Working with the children's allowance review team (CART) to support families with SGO allowances. Budget responsibility of this has moved to the assistant director for corporate parenting with line management of CART moving to business support.

Our aim of the new service includes:

- The reduction in the numbers of children coming into care that require a mainstream foster carer.
- To improve the use of family group conferences to identify potential care arrangements and consider use of Section 17 funding to avoid children coming into care.
- Increasing the number of applications made to the ASGSF for therapeutic services to support families with children on an SGO.
- Reduce the workload for children's social workers by moving the function for completing viability and full assessments into our service.
- Strengthen the support offered to kinship carers by centralising this to a structure that includes a team for kinship support, which helps both kinship foster carers and special guardians. The aim is that this will also help give confidence to existing kinship carers to apply for SGO's by improving the support offer, particularly during the early years of having an SGO and as children enter adolescence.
- Prevent the breakdown in SGO arrangements which are seeing several children return to the care system in their teenage years.
- Maximise the use of mainstream carers by ensuring that only those children that have no kinship offer available are placed with in house or independent fostering agency (IFA) carers. This will help reduce the number of residential placements being used due to the level of mainstream fostering provision.

As of 30 September 2024, we had 617 approved foster carer households, including kinship foster carers. They were looking after 680 Kent's children in care and 129 children were living with a family relative or friend under an interim or full care order, known as a connected person arrangement, including Section 20.

Fostering and Kinship Support Teams

Our service still has five area fostering support teams. We have one mainstream fostering team in each of the North, South and West area districts with two more in the East district. Alongside this, there is one kinship support team which provides support to kinship carers who care for Kent children throughout the country.

Each of the mainstream support teams has the full time equivalent (FTE) of one team manager, two senior practitioners (SP), five fostering social workers (FSW) and two fostering social work assistants (FSWA). The kinship support team has one team manager, one senior practitioner and three FTE fostering social workers.

We continue to identify ongoing areas for improvement around the utilisation of foster carers, including maximising the use of our in-house vacancies and to enhance the processes in place to match children both locally and across the county. We continue to work closely with the TPS who centrally identify care provisions for all children and young people in Kent.

Kinship Carers

There are currently 63 kinship carer fostering households. The team facilitates face to face and virtual support groups for kinship carers, as well as a virtual support group for those who are still in the assessment process.

Special Guardian Support and Therapeutic Fostering Team

This new team now supports 90 special guardian families. They also attend family group conferences, facilitate support groups for special guardians and co-ordinate the sessional carer support scheme to provide further support to foster carers caring for their children and young people.

In addition to this, the team provides a support group for carers who are offering step across to foster placements, which are supported through the special guardian support and therapeutic fostering team. These placements are for children and young people who are coming back to live with a family after staying in a residential provision.

The team advocates reflective fostering throughout all aspects of its work, seeking to support carers and professionals in gaining a shared understanding of why children and young people might present the way they do. The aim being to respond, rather than react, to the needs of children and young people.

VSK's participation team are currently looking at supporting us to gain a clearer voice for our children and young people who are supported by kinship foster carer families.

Disabled Children's Fostering Team

Our disabled children's fostering team was integrated with the main fostering support teams in April 2024. The experienced fostering staff continue to support foster carers to provide both full time care and short breaks for disabled children.

There are 25 foster carers for disabled children, including kinship carers, and approximately 11 are approved to provide short breaks care. Over the year we have seen carers continuing to support young people by transitioning to shared lives when they turn 18-years-old.

Support groups continue to be face to face and WhatsApp groups remain as an extension of the support groups. Four support groups are held across Kent with carers who live outside of the county linking into the face-to-face group via Microsoft teams.

Following the changes, social workers still work closely with our colleagues in the Strengthening Independence Service to support disabled children and their carers. They also attend events and

activities which enables them to see the children and young people in a different environment where they are having fun and enjoying themselves.

Fostering and Kent Supported Homes Development Team

The team was restructured in April 2024 to complete the assessments of applicants to become mainstream foster carers and carers for disabled children. Now called the recruitment, assessment, panels and training team (RAPTT) it continues to have the responsibility for recruitment including marketing, initial enquiries, the processing of applications, mainstream fostering assessments, fostering panels and training for both foster carers and KSH hosts. However, since 01st April 2024 the assessment of KSH hosts is completed by the 18+ Care Leavers Service.

Over the last year, close working relationships continue to be embedded between the fostering teams and the 18+ accommodation team to develop our fostering community. We continue to achieve this through a shared delivery of our host training and attendance at panel.

This year 40 new KSH hosts were approved, which does not include those whose approvals changed so that they could continue to support their young person following their 18th birthday under a staying put arrangement. We have seen a steady increase in requests to assess connected hosts for our young people and we have created clear business processes to ensure these assessments progress safely and swiftly.

Training and Learning

We delivered our annual foster carer conference in line with our 2023-2024 objective to deliver new skills and strategies to support foster carers day to day role and this was reflective of the needs of our children and young people. The conference, 'Relational Practice: Positive Approaches Towards Behaviour Management in the Home' was led by Hannah Hall, an experienced school improvement partner, consultant, coach and trainer specialising in behaviour, social, emotional and mental health, SEND and trauma. Feedback of the conference was overwhelmingly positive in all areas from the course content, delivery and learning outcomes.

In line with our other learning and development objectives, we delivered a comprehensive foster carer training program which was also available to our staff and encouraged good and consistent practice. This continued to be informed by regular consultation with carers and staff through the county advisory board and ambassador group, as well as feedback from foster carer annual reviews and as a result new training courses for the reporting year were introduced as follows:

- Introduction to therapeutic parenting and the playfulness, acceptance, curiosity and empathy model.
- Baby and toddler first aid training.
- Safe sleep for babies.
- Introduction to the national counter trafficking service.
- Working for the department.
- Confident, happy, independent, resilient, proud training.
- Drugs awareness.

For KSH hosts, training has evolved over the last year to enable hosts to have a more targeted support in line with their training requirements and as recommended by their Accommodation Officers as part of ongoing support and review within the 18+ accommodation team.

The Incredible Adolescent Brain was delivered with success and received positively and moving forward into the next year adverse childhood experiences and attachment training will be developed following feedback from hosts that they need to understand the impact of trauma and how best to support young people through the relationship, to process and understand their experiences.

This year also saw us move towards delivery of more virtual training. This is because despite initial feedback from foster carers in 2022-2023 that they wanted in person delivery to be reintroduced,

attendance remained very low when this was facilitated. This contrasted with virtual training where all courses had waiting lists.

Another objective was for us to ensure our training program included mandatory learning for all linked carers. This was achieved through providing all linked carers with the opportunity to attend safer care training, understanding trauma and safeguarding against radicalisation the PREVENT duty. We endeavour to facilitate maximum uptake by holding evening courses as well as daytime, as many linked carers work full time outside of their fostering role.



Image is of our Foster Carers Annual Awards 2024



Recruitment and Marketing

In 2023-2024, our primary message emphasized inclusivity, welcoming individuals of all ages, marital statuses, religions, ethnicities, cultures, sexual orientations, disabilities, and genders. This message was consistently communicated through our marketing and recruitment activities to foster a diverse network of foster carers, particularly attracting applications from minority ethnic and LGBTQ+ communities.

We utilised a content calendar to plan and schedule social media posts, manage campaigns, and review our strategy, ensuring our audience remained engaged. Our campaigns were aligned with key dates such as Foster Care Fortnight, LGBTQ+ Week, Black History Month, and Refugee Week. Contributions from foster carers received positive engagement on Facebook, supported by a strong network of foster carers, hosts, and partners who actively shared our content. As a result, we have established a distinct identity and narrative that sets us apart from other local authorities and independent fostering agencies.



Earlier this year, we launched an innovative programme with a pilot starting in autumn. The first Kent Mockingbird Constellation will be operational by November 2024, with an experienced social worker assistant recruited as the Liaison Worker. The first Home Hub Carer for Constellation 1 is from South Kent, and the second Home Hub Carers for Constellation 2, launching in early 2025, are from East Kent.

On July 15, key figures from Kent's Children's Services, along with partners from 19 other Southeast Local Authorities, visited Bracknell Forest Council to launch the DfE-funded 'Local Authority Fostering Southeast' initiative.

Bracknell Forest Council leads the Southeast Fostering Recruitment Hub, collaborating to increase local fostering and reduce reliance on Independent Fostering Agencies.

Key features of the hub include a shared website and phone number, sub-clusters for support, a service lead, standardized peer support, dedicated recruitment staff, data analysis, regional communications, and targeted campaigns. The VSK participation team and care leavers shared insights on fostering, and we anticipate positive outcomes from the hub's creation.

E-mail

By the end of the reporting year, 686 people had opted in to receive marketing communications from us, which continued to assist in keeping enquirers engaged with us when at the time of their first enquiry they might not have been ready to foster or chosen another agency with whom to work.

We also requested that all services across the local authority use our e-mail banner as part of their signature to further our reach and take every opportunity possible to advertise our message to both internal staff and all partner agencies who we communicate with, as part of the authority's day to day work.



Television, Radio and Film

We have joined forces with other local authorities and the council advertising network to collaborate on and commission a film about fostering called 'any of us' which gave an insight into the lives of different people, doing different jobs and at different stages of their lives, who made the decision to become foster carers, which was then featured on our website and Facebook page.

Information Events

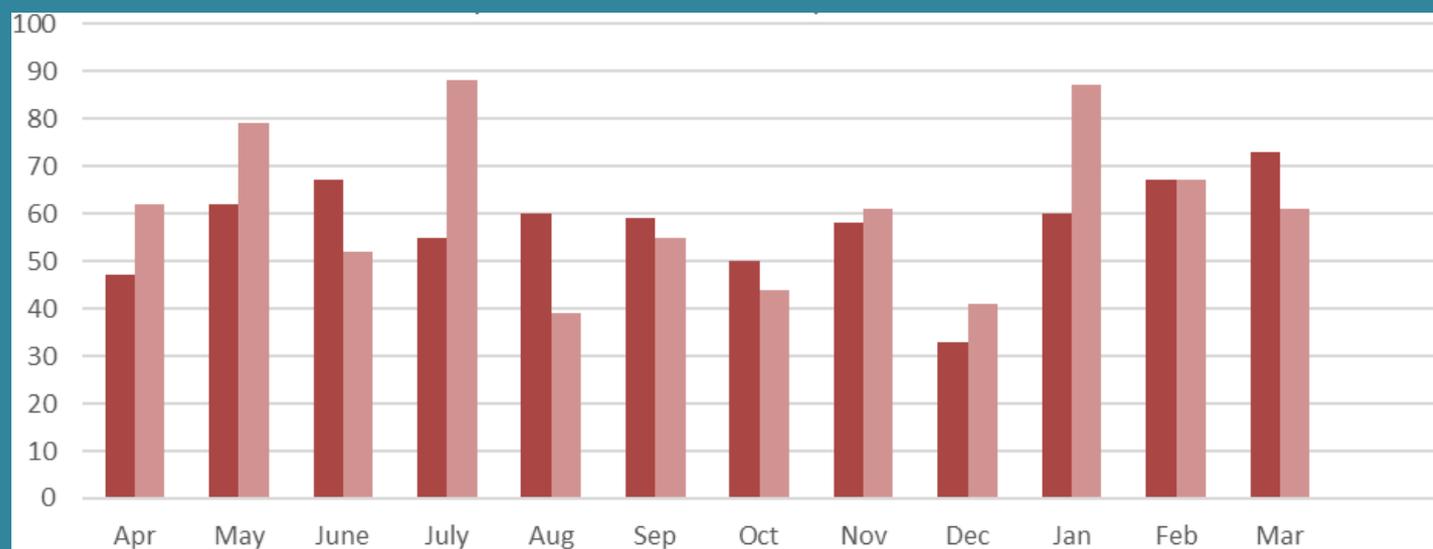
Information events continued virtually throughout 2023–2024. Approximately one was held every month, the majority of which took place in the evening and also at a weekend. This was the fourth year of we held regular events through Microsoft teams and across the year 320 people signed up and 155 attended. For those who registered to attend and then did not we followed up with them and maintained links and their interest through the sending of quarterly pre-approval newsletters.

Following each information event and throughout the enquiries process, enquirers continued to be offered the opportunity to speak to carers and hosts about their roles to make an application as fully informed as possible. Foster carers and KSH hosts continued to support the delivery of the information events alongside the fostering assessment managers, recruitment manager and the accommodation team manager. Following each information event, attendee feedback was gathered and scrutinised to enable changes to the presentation and delivery of information to be adapted.

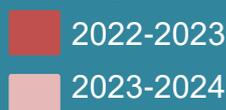
Enquiries

Our initial enquiries advisors maintained a reputation for delivering a professional, responsive, and expedient enquiries service to people interested in fostering, which saw us consistently scored in the top three of all Southeast local authorities 'mystery shopped' by partners in the Southeast sector led improvement programme (SESLIP).

We saw a 7% increase in people contacting us to express their interest in becoming a foster carer compared to the previous year. This is a significant achievement given the national downward trend in people expressing an interest in becoming foster carers. 328 Initial enquiry forms were completed, a 9% increase on 2022-2023. 318 of these were sent application packs, also an increase of 9% and 146 of these were returned, which is a 7% increase on the previous year.



Enquiry Data from 2022-2023 compared to 2023-2024



Communication and Inclusive Practice

We work alongside the fostering ambassadors who continue to undertake the following roles:

- Attending meetings with the Head of Service to review, update and develop policy and guidance.
- Consult on developing new services for foster carers and children.

We actively engage in service development, particularly in relation to inclusion, equality and diversity for our carers, raising awareness of unconscious bias and micro-aggressions, to grow an inclusive fostering community that is confident to challenge and intervene when these are then identified. Equality, diversity and inclusion groups are now established within each of the areas, meeting bi-monthly to discuss current issues.

Partnership Working

- Development and delivery of joint training to foster carers, adopters and children, young people and education (CYPE) staff on the University of East Anglia Adoption Transitions Model in partnership with APSE.
- With partners in public health and child and family training services a nomination for a 'children and young people's now award' for training designed and delivered to foster carers for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children to help them identify needs, deal with distress, support low mood and anxiety and help children tell their stories.

We have introduced and reviewed policies and practices to clarify and enhance the services we offer. We have involved our foster carer ambassadors and staff in this work and consulted with our care experienced young people through VSK to ensure the voice of the child is considered throughout. The work includes:

- Revision and Publication of the Payment for Skills Policy.
- Diary Records Policy, incorporating guidance around writing directly to the child.
- Passports for Children in Care, following feedback from carers and children in care that children did not receive their passports expediently and challenges within business support processes.
- DBS Policy.
- Promoting Positive Behaviour Policy and Emergency Bed Care for Newly Arrived Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children Policy and Guidance.

Kent Association of Foster Carers

2024-2025 saw us continue to work closely with KAFC, who have social committees in each foster support team area, with a clear hierarchy and accountability to fundraise for various local and countywide events for fostering families. Two Summerfest events were held this year, one at Dreamland in Margate and the other at Kent Life in Maidstone. Positive feedback was received for both events which had excellent turnouts of foster carers, and they are now looking at holding this year's Christmas event at Kent Life also. Our partnership with KAFC continues to be significant in attracting and retaining people to foster for Kent.

Annual Foster Carer Awards Ceremony

Our event took place on 8th November 2024 and included awards for KSH hosts to acknowledge the exceptional work they undertake along with our foster carers. We had an amazing 348 nominations for carers and staff across a range of categories with each winner receiving a certificate and hamper. We were privileged to have the awards presented by the Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Sue Chandler and Deputy Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Gary Cooke. Our Corporate Director for CYPE, Sarah Hammond, brought the ceremony to a close by expressing her own personal thank you to all of Kent's foster carers.

Adoption Partnership Southeast

In 2015 the Government set out its vision and commitment to deliver a regional adoption system where adoption agencies would come together to deliver adoption services on a larger scale. We are a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) comprising of the London Borough of Bexley, Kent County Council and Medway Council, and it launched on 1st November 2020 and delivers adoption services on behalf of the three local authorities.

The regional adoption agency is operated under the terms of a partnership agreement, which confirms the legal and governance arrangements; the budget; staffing and funding contributions for the three local authorities.

There are now 33 RAAs across England which are supported by Adoption England. Adoption England is a collaboration of regional adoption agencies working together, supported by a small central team working nationally. RAA leaders work collaboratively on developing and improving practice and delivering improved outcomes for children and families nationally and they developed a 3-year plan with 3 key priorities: recruitment, child's journey and adoption support.

The Head of service is engaged in the national forum of RAA leaders and involved in several work streams with a view to delivering on the priority areas identified.

Managers from within APSE are involved at several levels with the work of the national team. The Head of Service (HOS) sits on the governance board and both they and the service managers are involved in several of the practice working groups in place to deliver on the national priorities.

Governing of Our Service

Care Planning
Regulations 2010

Adoption Agency
Regulations 2005
(amended 2011)

Education and
Adoption Act 2016

Local Authority
Regulations 2005

Care planning,
placement and case and
fostering services
(Miscellaneous
Amendments)
Regulations 2013

Care Standards Act
2000

Adoption and
Children Act 2002

Adoption National
Minimum Standards
2011

Governance

- Our HOS reports quarterly to a partnership management board, which is comprised of director of children's services and senior officers from each partner local authority with representation drawn from the wider professional network. The chair is rotated on an annual basis and for a 12-month period.

- An operational managers group meets quarterly which includes our HOS, service managers for APSE, HOS and service managers for children in care teams from Bexley, Kent & Medway and Independent Reviewing Officer leads.

Management

We are managed by a HOS, two service managers, one of whom is responsible for the pre-adoption order work streams and one who is responsible for overseeing family finding and adoption support. There are nine teams within our service and each team is supported by business support officers. The agency has 90 members of staff.

- One advisory team.
- One panel team.
- One early permanence team.
- Two recruitment, assessment and support teams.
- One family finding team.
- Three adoption support teams.
- Each team is supported by business support officers who are line managed by two (1.5 FTE) business support leads.

KCC is committed to ensuring that children and young people can remain in the care of their parents and birth families wherever possible. However, where it is not possible to achieve stability for the child or young person within the birth family, the local authority works to achieve alternative permanent arrangements for the child or young person within a family setting and these include adoption.

What We Offer

We provide an adoption service directly and indirectly to:

- Children in need of an adoptive family.
- Birth families.
- People wishing to become parents of a non-related child through adoption.
- Reconstituted families wishing to adopt a related child.
- Support to prospective and approved adopters.
- Services to adults who have been adopted seeking their records.

Service for Children Whom Adoption is or May Be Their Care Plan

- The permanency planning leads and family finding adoption social workers become involved with every child for whom adoption may be the plan.
- Adoption social workers take a lead in family finding at the earliest point possible.
- This may result in an early permanence placement for a child with approved adopters, who are considered foster carers at the point of placement, until the court has decided about the child's future.
- Alternatively, we aim to place a child with adopters as quickly as possible, following the court's agreement to the local authority care plan of adoption and the granting of a placement order.

What is Available to Adopted Children and Young People

- Social groups and activities, delivered by VSK's participation and engagement team.
- Offering training and advice for schools to help teachers understand adopted children's needs.
- Working with children in their adoptive families around understanding their life stories.

What is Available to Prospective Adopters and Approved Adopters

- The recruitment of prospective adoptive families.
- The assessment and preparation of adoptive families, including visits to the home, a home assessment, taking up references and statutory checks and running preparation training.
- The running of weekly adoption panels which consider and make recommendations regarding adopter approvals and matches for children with adopters. These recommendations are then shared with the agency decision maker (ADM), who makes the final decision.
- The provision of advice, guidance, and support to adoptive families whilst waiting for a child to be placed with them, during the matching process and after placement. This includes facilitating workshops, training, and support groups.
- Peer support for adopters.
- The commissioning of an external service for those wishing to adopt from abroad.
- The assessment and support of relative/stepparent adoption assessments.

What is Available to Adoptive Families

- Access to a support and advice line service to respond in a timely way to requests for support.
- Access to an assessment of need, resulting in a support package based on the family's identified needs, including consideration of making an application to the adoption support fund.
- Access to support groups, both internal and external.
- Access to a learning and development programme and workshops.
- Access to therapeutic support groups.
- Access to therapists and a range of therapeutic interventions.
- Access to support with education through virtual schools in each local authority.
- Assistance and review of contact arrangements between adopters and birth relatives.
- Adopter led community support groups.

What is Available to Those Affected by Adoption

The RAA commissions independent services from Barnardo's to support those affected by adoption. Their service is bespoke to families eligible to receive support from us. It is called 'Connecting Adoptive Families Independent Service' (CAFIS). Services are provided to four groups of people affected by adoption:

- Service for birth parents
- Support for birth relatives
- Access to information and intermediary services
- Keeping in touch contact service

APSE and CAFIS are working closely with the national campaign for a culture of change around staying in touch arrangements for children with their birth families post adoption order.

All our work and support with families right from the preparation of prospective adopters through the support adoptive families with teenager works toward creating an open culture for adoptive and birth families to interact in ways which best meet the needs of the children involved. This is evidenced in an increase of in person staying in touch arrangements taking place.

Commissioning Support Programme

In support of the national adoption strategy⁵, the DfE has made grant funding available over a two-year period to explore whether national or pan-regional commissioning arrangements would facilitate better access and value for money when commissioning services for adoption support.

We are working with Adopt South and Adoption Southeast to achieve the following goals:

- To provide additional commissioning capacity across the region.
- To improve the collective understanding of the need of adoptive families, now and in the future.
- To increase pan-regional commissioning arrangements on the ground.
- To share best practice and increase consistency.

Assessing needs and understanding the gap between those needs and existing services informs local priorities and service development. The overall aim is to improve the speed of service and provide a better quality and consistency of adoption support across the region and for our three RAAs to understand how joint working can practically happen.

Performance

A comprehensive outline of performance is contained within our Annual Report 2023-2024.

The Adopter Journey

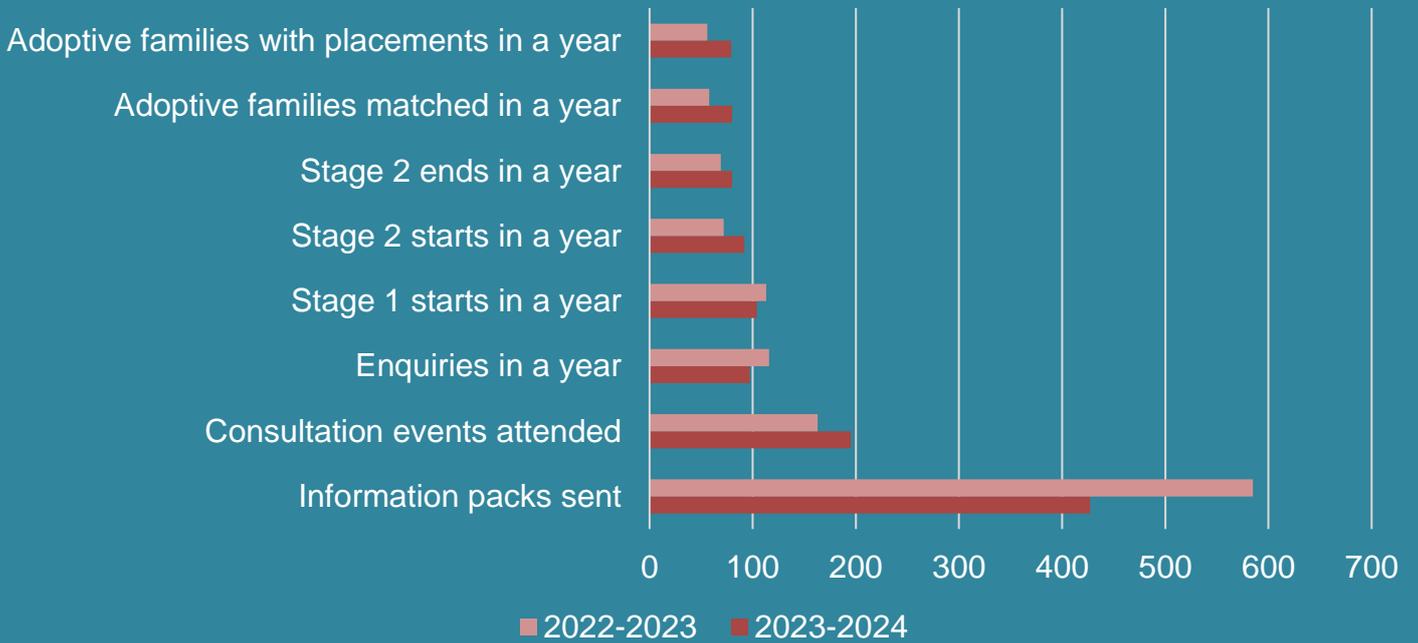
We seek to recruit, assess, and support adopters who can meet the needs of children from within the three partner local authorities.

⁵ July 2021.

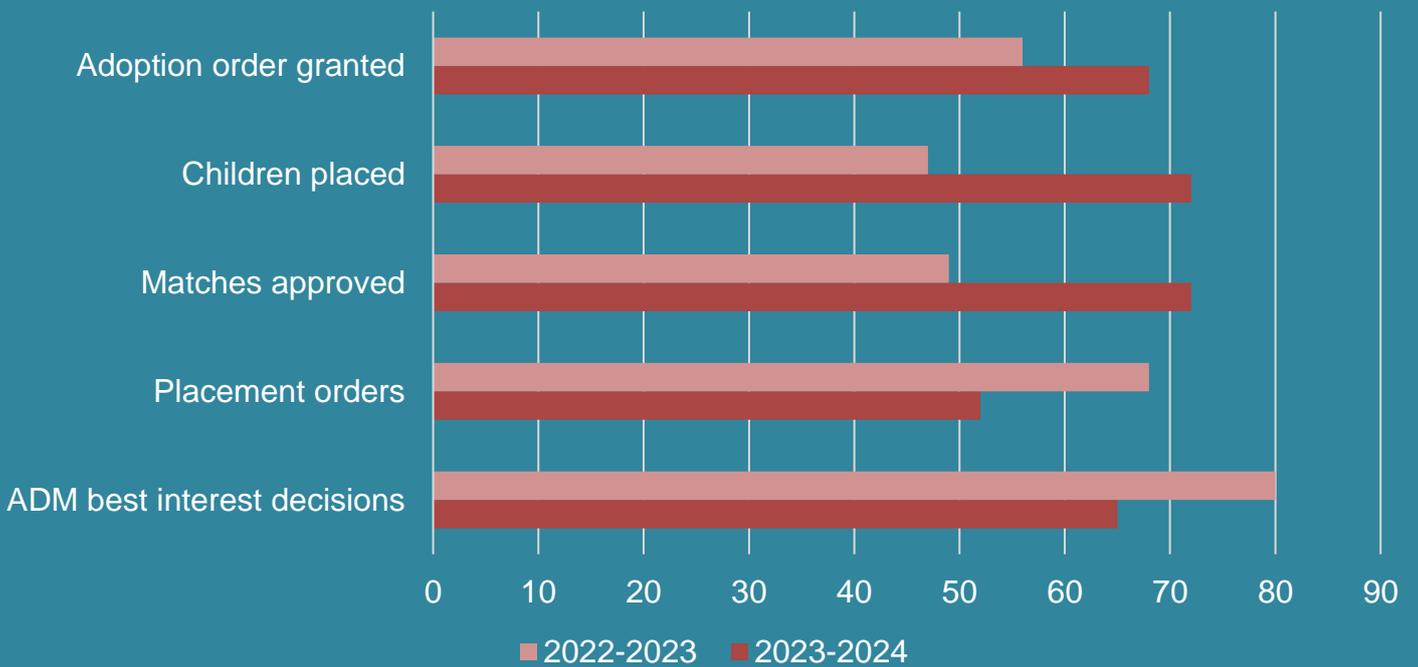


Children's Data

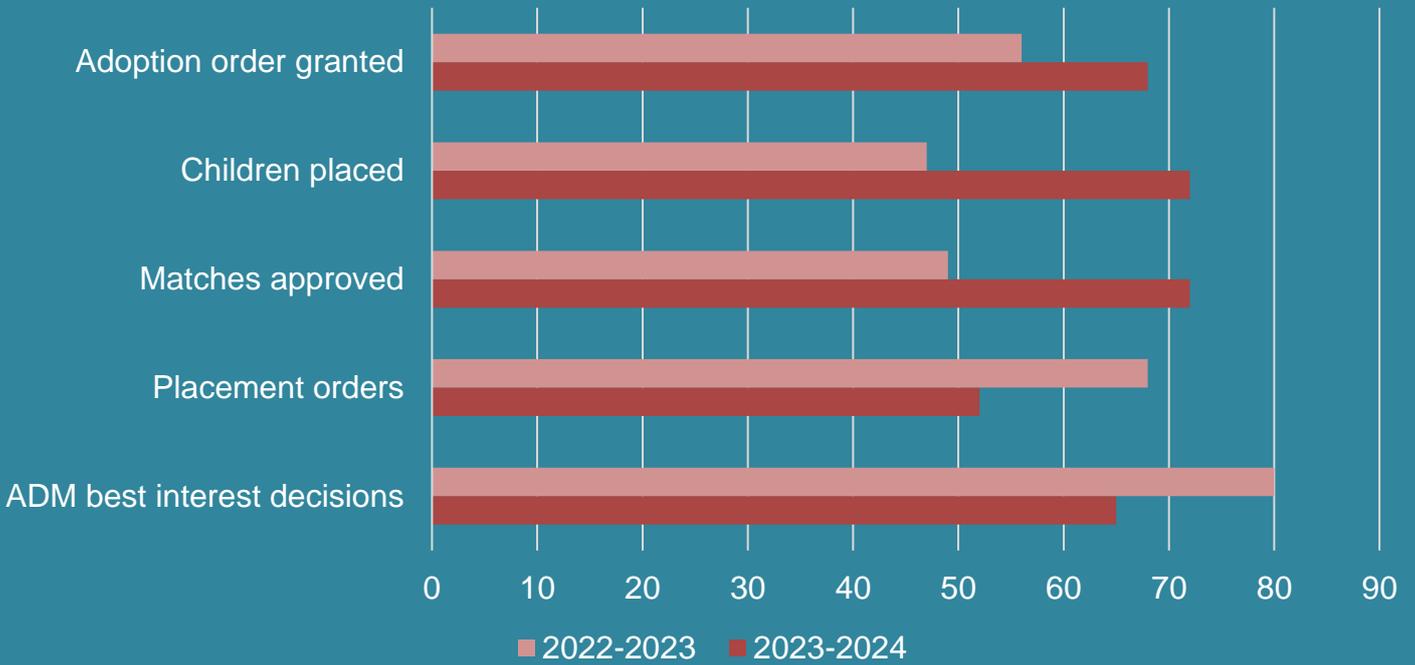
Adopter Activity as Households



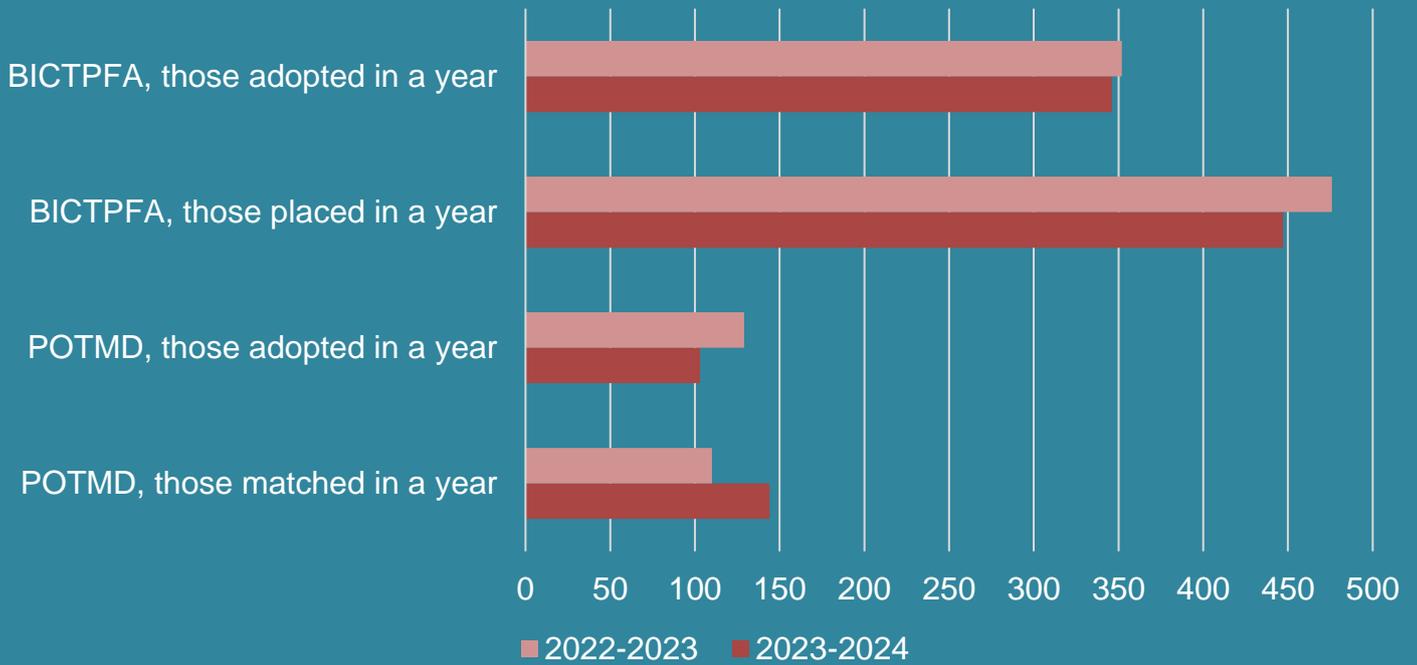
Indicator



Timescale Indicator



Timescale Indicator



Placement order to matching decision (POTMD).

Became in care to placed for adoption (BICTPFA).

During this period, 80 households were approved as adopters which ensured sufficiency of adopters for Bexley, Kent, and Medway children. In total, 97 children were placed with adopters during 2023-2024 and 88 of these children were placed with the RAA assessed and approved adopters. Between April 2023 and March 2024, six adopter households had children from outside of the RAA placed for adoption with them.

Agency Decision Maker Best Interest Decisions

The ADM is usually a Director of Children's Services or an Assistant Director who agrees adoption would be in a child's best interest and should be presented to a court as the local authority's care plan.

In 2020-2021, there was an increase in the number of adoption plans agreed by the ADM. KCC agreed the plan for adoption for 80 children in 2022-2023, this decreased in 2023-2024 to 65 children.

Placement Orders

A placement order is the legal order granted when a court agrees adoption should be the care plan for a child. 68 placement orders were granted for our children in 2022-2023 but fell to 52 in 2023-2024.

Matches Approved

In 2022-2023, there were 49 matches and in 2023-2024 this rose to 72.

Children Placed for Adoption

In 2022-2023 there were 47 children placed, in 2023-2024 this rose to 72 placements that began with adoptive families.



Total Placement Service

We are part of CYPE's children's commissioning working for our children in care and care leavers to find them safe, stable, and appropriate homes. We provide a one-stop shop for Social Workers and Personal Advisers to access good quality homes for the children and young people in our care, prioritising our in-house provision where possible.

Our service is compliant with Ofsted and the Quality Care Commission (QCC) requirements, and our work is governed by a range of legislation and regulations, including the Children's Homes Regulation (2015), Fostering Services Regulation (2011) and The Children Act (1989).

We are managed by a service manager and there are three permanent teams. Each team has a manager, senior placement officer and placement officers who try to find a variety of different homes. We have 17 placement officers and three senior placement officers. We are supported by three business support officers.

This year we have a 9-month temporary unaccompanied asylum-seeking children's placement team to work with the Reception and Safe Care Service (RSCS) to find homes for children and young people who are new arrivals. This has been invaluable in managing the often-unpredictable numbers of new arrivals enabling us to continue focusing on finding homes for all children and young people. We have streamlined processes within this team to support and enable the new timescales within the National Transfer Service (NTS).

The residential team look for homes in secure accommodation, Ofsted regulated children's homes and group living homes regulated by the CQC primarily for those over 16 years into adulthood. Exceptionally, where we are unable to find a regulated home for a child the team try to identify an unregistered home there is more about this later. Finally, the team undertake all searches for both fostering and residential family centre placements for parent(s) and child(ren).

The fostering team look for homes with our in-house foster carers and homes with foster carers with IFA's. Kent's in house fostering service now lead on the work in delivering the Step-Across to Fostering Scheme (SATFS) with us exploring potential IFA options when in house options are exhausted. The scheme finds foster homes for children who are living in residential settings and are ready to move on to a family setting.

When seeking a home from IFA's our team use the IFA framework. An additional IFA framework has been developed to support and enable newly arrived unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors to have a home whilst they await transfer to another local authority on the NTS. This was originally 13 placements but has been extended to 21 beds. This is further enhanced by 39 in house placements being set aside for new arrivals, giving a total of 60 placements. There is significant pressure locally, regionally, and nationally in terms of the limited number of foster homes and this is certainly the case in Kent. This means that we must purchase homes outside of the framework and outside of Kent.

The 16+ team identifies homes for those young people who are aged 16-19-years-old. The umbrella term for all provision is supported accommodation and is regulated by the Supported Accommodation (England) Regulations (2023). The provision includes:

- KSH: an in-house provision that provides homes with a host within the host's home.
- Supported accommodation: which was previously known as semi-independent accommodation where varying levels of support are provided to the young person dependent on their independent living skills and is spot purchased.
- Low and medium need shared accommodation both of which are purchased via a block contract with existing providers.

Supported accommodation is designed to support young people in their journey to full independent living giving them the tools and ability to achieve this. Levels of support generally range from 5-35 hours per week. However, it is recognised that for short periods young people may require additional

support, but this should be for a limited period. Providers who continue to offer homes for children and young people and who are not registered are deemed unregulated and therefore unlawful.

On a positive note, we have a good number of local supported accommodation semi-independent provisions available to us. The 16+ team also manage the process for staying put arrangements with foster carers allowing young people to remain with their carers post-18.

Nationally and locally placement pressures continue irrespective of the type of home that is required. Issues that are affecting growth and sufficiency are:

- Whilst there are vacancies in children's homes there is considerable focus on ensuring children who live together are 'matched' to promote and deliver effective group living and care. This limits the number of accessible vacancies available for a child. There have been increases in costs and the requirement for additional resources such as one to one staffing within this provision.
- There continue to be significant difficulties in the recruitment of foster carers both for KCC's Fostering Service but also for IFA's. KCC are involved in work with the DfE's regional fostering hub for recruitment as a pilot scheme.
- Secure accommodation availability continues to be problematic with referrals and demands significantly outstripping provision. The referral system has now been streamlined through a portal.
- A lack of residential solo provision or residential provision that has multi-location. Multi-location provision is where a home can have up to six placements in up to four locations allowing for solo placements moving towards group living.

These sufficiency issues are further exacerbated by the very complex and diverse needs some of our children have, for very few, even if only for a very short while they may require a solo home. This provision is very scarce locally and nationally. Unfortunately, often after extensive searching where we have been unable to identify a regulated home for one of our children, we have no option but to use a home that falls outside of regulation and is referred to as an unregistered home. Historically, we have used semi-independent providers however, there is an increasing paucity of this accommodation given the requirement for these providers to be registered under the Supported Accommodation (England) Regulations (2023).

The operation and use of unregistered homes is a breach of Ofsted regulations. However, the policy, processes and practices that are employed to manage this with KCC are robust and effective providing excellent oversight within the service, CYPE and to Ofsted and where applicable, the courts. The focus, as always, is absolutely on the welfare and needs of the child.

The other area that impacts on sufficiency is the continued year on year increase in the number newly arrived unaccompanied minors particularly in the case of foster homes and semi-independent accommodation. There are 60 ring fenced foster placements and nine ring fenced supported accommodation semi-independent placements to meet the current demand. This will be reviewed, in line with KCC opening its own supported accommodation and children's homes for new arrivals.

Our service and its managers, seniors and placement officers supported by colleagues in commissioning, work hard to build and maintain effective working relationships with our foster carers and providers in the external market to optimise offers of homes against a backdrop of increasing demand regionally and nationally.

There has been a decrease of 11% in search activity across all TPS teams when searching for homes of non-unaccompanied asylum-seeking children between the two previous financial years. Placement activity for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children has increased in the same period by over 100%. The service has begun to see a very slow decline in placement finding for the 18+ Care Leavers Service because of in the main, no longer needing to find homes for those aged 19-years-old and above.

Currently performance reported in the Corporate Parenting Scorecard for June 2024 is marginally improved from last year when considering the two key performance indicators related to stable homes.

The first indicator to consider is where a child has had 3 or more moves in the last 12 months. The current report shows that 10.6% of our children and young people had been subject to this number of moves, and improvement on last year which showed 10.9%. The target is 10%.

We have 71.8% of our children and young people who have lived in their current home for more than 2 years, this is below the figure for the same time last year which was 73.4%. Our target is 70% so it is pleasing to report that we have met and exceeded this. We continue to prioritise and support effective matching between children and young people and their carers to promote stability and permanence where possible.

An area that requires ongoing focus is that of children and young people who live more than 20 miles from home. The target is 80% and performance is currently at 70.8%, due to the number of foster families providing emergency homes to newly arrived children.



Aims and Priorities

A restructure or re-alignment of our service to ensure it is fit for purpose now and in the future, it is anticipated that this will be concluded by January 2025.

Automation of the processes within the service to support efficiencies and a focus on supporting colleagues in effective cost negotiations at the start of and the duration of any placement.

The two yearly review and revision of processes to ensure effective and efficient systems are in place to find homes optimising the use of in-house foster carers and reducing delays.

In conjunction with Children's Commissioning Service, developing SharePoint information to support key stakeholders in accessing and using our services.

Building effective relationships with carers and providers to ensure we can provide the best value homes for our children that give stability and meet the needs of our children and young people.

Supporting effective matching between homes and our children and in doing so promoting stability and supporting children and young people to realise their potential.

Continuous building of effective working relationships with colleagues and key stakeholders through secondments to and from the team.

How Our Elected Members Can Get Involved

Our services welcome visits from elected members especially at our activity and celebration events when there is an opportunity to meet the children and young people in our care, for whom we are acting as their corporate parent. The Corporate Parenting Panel receive regular performance updates and we welcome questions from members to support their understanding of the role of a corporate parent. Kent Fostering Service would appreciate any support that members can provide in promoting the recruitment of foster carers for KCC within their local constituency.

Christmas Campaign

Our Christmas campaign has now become a yearly event. In December 2023 the campaign raised more than our £20k target, reaching £21,014.45. Changing our campaign to broaden it out to both local and national businesses, ensured we met the target more quickly than in previous years. This meant on Christmas day every one of our young people who are care leavers received a Christmas card from their Corporate Parents with either a £10 gift voucher for them to treat themselves or a gift to the value of £10. These were well received by our young people, who said it made them feel very special to receive this in the post. The success of the campaign left some additional funding for welcome gift boxes to be provided to young people moving into their first accommodation in 2024.

Our 2024 Christmas Campaign

This year's campaign will again focus on asking local businesses to support with financial donations. Due to the current financial pressures society is facing, we recognise we need to be sensitive about asking our KCC staff for financial donations, whilst still giving those who can donate, the opportunity to do this. The target for 2024, is £25,000, an additional £5,000 to be used to give 50 young adult care leavers a Christmas Day to remember - those that would otherwise be on their own, will be invited for Christmas dinner, with transport, gifts and entertainment provided. £20,000 is needed to give each of our young adults a £10 gift voucher for them to treat themselves or a gift to the value of £10.

Text XMASGIFT24 to
70201 to donate £1
70331 to donate £3
70970 to donate £5
70191 to donate £10

Click here to find
out more or
donate online

This Christmas
Consider donating to Corporate
Parenting's Christmas campaign for
care leavers

Kent
County
Council
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Learn, Support
the Young
Lives
Foundation

The above banner link will direct you to <https://ylf.org.uk/christmas/>