

CABINET

12 MARCH 2013

OFSTED INSPECTION OF LOCAL AUTHORITY ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE PROTECTION OF CHILDREN

Portfolio Holders: Councillor Les Wicks, Portfolio Holder – Lead Member for Children’s Services
Councillor David Wildey, Portfolio Holder – Children’s Social Care

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Summary

An inspection of the local authority arrangements for the protection of children in Medway took place between 7 and 16 January 2013. The Ofsted report was published on February 15 2013. This report provides a summary of the findings.

1. Budget and Policy Framework

- 1.1 This report provides Cabinet with the findings from the January 2013 Ofsted unannounced inspection into the arrangements for the protection of children in Medway.
- 1.2 All English Local Authorities which were previously rated as ‘adequate’ in their last Safeguarding and Looked after Children’s Inspection, have been or will be, inspected under this single agency Ofsted framework by the end of May 2013.
- 1.3 The inspection was carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

2. Background

- 2.1 Medway was last inspected between 3-14 October 2011 by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission. That inspection focused on both Looked After Children and Children’s Safeguarding. Both areas were found to be ‘adequate’.
- 2.2 The framework for the inspection that took place in 2011 was significantly different to the one Ofsted currently uses. Ofsted revised the criteria for

inspection in April 2012, with a significantly higher bar, more rigorous attention to individual case work and no notice.

- 2.3 This inspection considered key aspects of a child's journey through the child protection system, focusing on the experiences of the child or young person, and the effectiveness of the help and protection that they are offered. The inspection focused on the effectiveness of the multi-agency arrangements for identifying children who are suffering, or likely to suffer harm, from abuse or neglect; and for the provision of early help where it is needed. It also considered the effectiveness of the local authority and its partners in protecting these children if the risk remains or intensifies.
- 2.4 The Inspector scrutinised case files, observed practice, spoke with children, their families, social workers, managers and other professionals. They analysed performance data, management information and business plans such as the one for the Medway Safeguarding Children's Board.

3. Findings and analysis

- 3.1 The current Ofsted framework has four areas that are graded as part of an inspection. These are:
- Overall effectiveness
 - The effectiveness of the help and protection provided to children, young people, families and carers
 - The quality of practice
 - Leadership and governance

The current provision in Medway was judged to be inadequate across all four domains.

- 3.2 It is important to note that the inspection found no child to be at immediate risk of harm. In the summary that accompanied the full inspection report, the inspector commented that:
- The new senior managers who run Medway children's services are very clear about the changes they need to make so that life is better for children and families in the area. The new senior managers know that the pace of improvement from different services has been too slow. They want to make changes rapidly and have made an early start. Some important changes include explaining their plan to workers to make sure they understand the new ways of working to help and protect children.
 - People and different services who work with children and families in Medway are passionate about their job. Any children who are at immediate risk of harm are protected by their social worker and other services.
 - Children and families who find life difficult and ask for help are put in touch with services that make real differences to their lives. Children's centres and family support workers play a very important role in helping to identify children and families who need help and provide support quickly and early to stop the problems getting worse.
 - Most parents who met inspectors are highly appreciative of the support, help and guidance they receive from family social workers, children's centres and other services.

- Meetings to discuss how best to protect children at risk of harm are well led. Parents are given the opportunity to take part and give their views when decisions are made about protecting their children.
 - There is strong political support from elected members and at a corporate level from the Chief Executive.
- 3.3 Whilst the inspectors found that some work was adequate and good, one of their key concerns was the variability of practice. Referring to aspects of the inspection report, it states that it takes too long for some children to be seen, with some cases closed too early, and too high a level of re-referrals and repeat assessments.
- 3.4 The voice of the child is not consistently heard strongly enough in all our work and even if we do listen to their views, they are often not well recorded. Children are not always seen alone when visited by a social worker. Some children and families experience too many changes in social workers.
- 3.5 The quality of the recording by children's social workers is not consistently good enough. The poor recording did not enable the inspectors to see if work had been completed to a good enough standard. The inconsistent quality of assessment and recording was also mentioned in relation to the Common Assessment Framework process, alongside a lack of a quality assurance mechanism.
- 3.6 The performance monitoring and performance management of child protection work was found not to be strong enough. This is within in the Council and also for the Medway Safeguarding Children's Board (MSCB), which should hold all partner agencies to account on the quality of child protection work. Whilst partners were willing to come to the MSCB with a strong commitment to protecting children and young people, there were issues around information sharing with children's social care when they were undertaking assessments.
- 3.7 Whilst the leadership and management was deemed to be inadequate, the inspectors recognised that there had been clear prioritisation of child protection by the Council and that '*There is strong political support from elected members and at a corporate level from the Chief Executive*'. The inspectors also noted that the new Director of Children and Adult Services had quickly understood the key areas for development and is '*significantly increasing the pace of change*'.

4. Next Steps

- 4.1 The Council will be formally issued an 'Improvement Notice' by the Secretary of State via the Department for Education in the next few weeks.
- 4.2 The Council will be required to establish an Improvement Board, which will over-see the implementation of the actions in the Improvement Notice and the areas for improvement in the Ofsted report. These usually are broadly the same. This will be a very structured process with formal governance arrangements, clear aims and objectives that are attributed to officers and partners, and regular performance monitoring following strict project management principles.

- 4.3 Prior to the inspector's arrival in early January, work had already commenced on a number of these areas, but the improvement plan that supported this work was not sufficiently mature and embedded. The inspectors viewed the improvement plan and commented positively on its content and focus. Therefore, various strands of work have already commenced to deliver these essential service improvements.
- 4.4 The Department for Education expects a Local Authority in the position Medway is currently in to be subject to an improvement notice for approximately two years. Ofsted does not usually return in the first 12 months of an improvement notice to re-inspect the same areas, but they have the powers to do so if they so wish.
- 4.5 The current Ofsted framework changes with effect from April 2013. The current single agency Ofsted inspection ceases and a new multi agency inspection will start from approximately May 2013. The new inspection framework will have a higher bar again than the current regime and new grade descriptors (the basis on which services are assessed). There will be two multi-agency inspections, one for safeguarding and one for looked after children from May 2013. Whilst the safeguarding inspection is unlikely to return within the next 12 months, it is highly likely that Medway will be subject to a multi-agency looked after children's inspection within this period. The new framework for these inspections has not yet been agreed and as such are not available in the public domain.

5. Risk Assessment

- 5.1 The Council's primary aim is to urgently improve child protection and safeguarding services, directly addressing the findings contained in the Ofsted inspection report. In doing so, the impact of the improvement plan must be immediate to address the areas of urgent concern but also ensure that key service changes are sustained in the longer term.
- 5.2 Formal governance arrangements are to be implemented to oversee the immediate and longer term service improvements, to ensure that they are delivered at the required pace of change and to the requisite standards. The Ofsted inspector has already endorsed the focus and content of the Director of Children and Adults Services' improvement plan and additional resources have been approved by Members. Progress will be monitored very closely through the Improvement Board and will be subject to internal and external scrutiny and validation.

6. Financial and legal implications

- 6.1 The Council has already agreed to invest an additional £1.1m in children's social care and specifically £350,000 to support the improvements that are needed to improve the safeguarding arrangements for children in Medway. This augments approximately £1.4m that was approved in July 2012 for the new children and adults electronic management system.
- 6.2 The Ofsted report acknowledges that there are no children at immediate risk. The Council is not in breach of any statutory duty. Legal Services will be supporting Children and Adults Services in pursuing their improvement aims, including provision of case progress statistics on a regular basis.

7. Recommendation

- 7.1 Cabinet is asked to note the findings of the Ofsted inspection and the improvement arrangements that are being established in response to the Department for Education's improvement notice.

8. Suggested Reasons for Decision

- 8.1 To report the findings of the recent Ofsted inspection and the arrangements that are being implemented to secure urgent and sustainable service improvements.

Background Papers

http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/local_authority_reports/medway/051_Inspection%20of%20local%20authority%20arrangements%20for%20the%20protection%20of%20children%20as%20pdf.pdf

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