

CABINET

3 SEPTEMBER 2013

OFSTED INSPECTION OF LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN SERVICES

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Mike O'Brien, Portfolio Holder – Lead Member for Children's Services

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Summary

An inspection of the local authority arrangements for looked after children in Medway took place between 15 and 19 July 2013. The Ofsted report was published on 23 August 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 July 2013 Ofsted unannounced inspection into the arrangements for looked after 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, were inspected under a single agency Ofsted framework by the end of May 2013 in relation to safeguarding arrangements. A small number, 5 or 6, Local Authorities have been, or will be, inspected under these arrangements for looked after children between May 2013 and September 2013.
- 1.3 Ofsted are developing a new inspection regime for children's social care which will bring back into one inspection all services for children. The current single inspections of safeguarding and looked after services will cease in the autumn of 2013. The new framework is in development and is proposed to start this autumn.
- 1.4 The inspection was carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

2. Background

- 2.1 In January 2013 Medway was inspected in relation to safeguarding arrangements by Ofsted. The Ofsted report on this inspection was published in February 2013. The judgement published in February 2013 was an inadequate rating.
- 2.2 A small number of authorities will be inspected between May and September 2013 for looked after children services. Ofsted are moving to a new inspection regime for children's social care in the autumn of 2013, bringing together safeguarding and looked after children inspections into a single approach to reflect the 'journey of the child'. This framework and the grade criteria are not yet published. This means Medway will not be inspected again under this current framework. There is then a further change planned by Ofsted for 2014/15 with the development of a multi - agency inspection regime for children being introduced.
- 2.3 During this looked after children inspection, the Inspectors scrutinised case files, observed practice, spoke with children looked after, 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. The Inspectors sent a survey to looked after children to seek their views on the service. There was a very low response rate to this survey by Medway looked after children but the comments made are still reflected in the findings of the inspectors.

3. Findings and analysis

- 3.1 The current Ofsted framework has four areas that are graded as part of an inspection. These are:
- Capacity to improve
 - Outcomes for looked after children & young people
 - The quality of provision
 - Leadership and management

These four areas taken together leads to an 'overall effectiveness' grading. In the overall effectiveness Medway was judged to be inadequate, however the 'capacity to improve' judgement was rated as adequate.

- 3.2 It is important to note that, as in January 2013, the inspection found no child to be at immediate risk of harm. In summarising overall effectiveness, the inspection report notes:
- Medway staff and managers are working hard to improve service provision
 - Action to strengthen services is being taken
 - There is an improving picture in relation to care leavers in employment, education and training although performance still remains below comparator authority
 - There is an increasing clarity of service priorities and focused action taken to provide a solid foundation for moving the service forward.

- Appointments to key posts have been made and are already improving some aspects of service provision.
- An escalation protocol has been formalised with Cafcass (Child and family court assessment service) and there has been a reduction in the time care proceedings are taking.

3.3 The adequate capacity to improve is significant. This signals that Ofsted have confidence in the local authority leadership, including the Lead member for Children's Services and the Director of Children and Adults Services, as well as the support offered corporately by the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive. The Ofsted inspectors report that Medway is actively addressing inadequacies and that for the numerous changes already introduced, they are too recent or not yet fully implemented so it is too soon to see the impact on outcomes for children. There was recognition of the 'considerable investment' that Medway has invested into the service and the overarching priorities being reflected coherently in the council plan and the health and well being strategy. They now saw an appropriate workforce strategy in place and activity focusing on providing stability in the workforce.

3.4 The inspection found other areas where there is strong work and positive outcomes for children. These include:

- Arrangements to ensure the physical care of looked after children, such as immunisations and dental treatment
- Looked after children's nurses contribute effectively to looked after reviews and provide adequate health promotion activities.
- Arrangement for ensuring children looked after are safe are adequate, with effective multi-agency arrangements in place to safeguard children who may go missing from care or those who may be at risk of sexual exploitation.
- Statutory reviews and visiting of children looked after are timely
- Placement stability is good and transition plans are good.
- The offer of accommodation to care leavers is good.
- A good range of education and training provision is available post 16 years and designated teachers provide effective support for looked after children with an adequate number of looked after children in university.
- No Medway looked after child was permanently excluded from school.
- Children looked after and care leavers make a good contribution to help organise events that show their contribution and influence improving services.
- The Children in Care Council is well established and very effective in working with the local authority.

3.5 Whilst the inspectors found that some work was adequate and good, one of their key concerns was the variability of practice and the quality of management oversight. Referring to aspects of the inspection report, it states that it hard to understand the 'journey of the child' from looking at the records. The inspectors did not see chronologies in place on all files, nor did the management decision making explicitly show the rationale for the decisions that were made.

- 3.6 Concerns were expressed that case loads for social workers were unacceptably high and that children and families experienced too many changes in social workers. A theme in the report highlighted that not all staff knew what was happening across the service, e.g. some good services were not always known about. This also reflected in relation to children who were looked after too, for example, not all children knew about the Children in care Council or how to make a complaint.
- 3.7 Two of the areas of concern relate to health. One is around the sufficiency of looked after children nurses. This has already been acknowledged and the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) has agreed to additional funding and recruitment for an additional post is underway. The other issue relates to child and adolescent mental health. This is a jointly commissioned service with Kent County Council and has recently been awarded to a new provider. Again, there will be focused efforts to improve this service.

4. Next Steps

- 4.1 The Council was issued an 'Improvement Notice' by the Secretary of State via the Department for Education (DfE) in relation to the Safeguarding Inspection. It is anticipated that a further notice will not be required, although discussions with the DfE has yet to take place.
- 4.2 The Council has established an Improvement Board, independently Chaired by Jane Held. The Improvement Board will over-see the implementation of the actions in the Improvement Notice and the areas for improvement in both the Ofsted reports. There will be no requirement to make any changes to these arrangements.
- 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 As outlined earlier in the report, the current Ofsted framework is subject to further review and change. The current single agency Ofsted inspection ceases and a new multi agency inspection will start from approximately November 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). 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 children's safeguarding and looked after services, directly addressing the findings contained in both the Ofsted inspection reports. 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. Further investment may be needed to ensure social worker case loads are reduced to an acceptable level.
- 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.
- 7.2 That a further report is brought to Cabinet in three months to update Cabinet on the progress, particularly in relation to the immediate actions required.

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

Ofsted Inspection of Looked after Children Services www.ofsted.gov.uk/local-authorities/medway

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