

CABINET

17 DECEMBER 2013

UPDATE ON OFSTED INSPECTION OF LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN SERVICES

Portfolio Holder	Councillor Mike O'Brien, Children's Services (Lead Member)
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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 is to provide Members with an update on looked after children's services and addresses how progress is being made in relation to the specific actions in the Looked After Children (LAC) Ofsted report.

This is an information report.

1. Budget and Policy Framework

- 1.1 This report provides the Cabinet with an update on progress made against the findings from the July 2013 Ofsted unannounced inspection into the arrangements for looked after children in Medway.
- 1.2 The inspection was carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.
- 1.3 Since this time Ofsted have introduced a new inspection regime for children's social care, which will be a single inspection all services for children, that is both safeguarding and looked after children. There will not be a re-inspection against this looked after children's Ofsted framework.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Ofsted Looked After Children's inspection took place in July 2013. Ofsted rated the looked after children's services as 'inadequate', although the inspection judgement around 'capacity to improve' was rated as 'adequate'. This reflected the positive progress made since the inspection of

safeguarding services, and gave assurance that the current political and officer leadership was addressing the issues with good early indications of improvement.

- 2.2 Medway has a formal Improvement Notice issued by the Department of Education (DfE), and has an established Improvement Board with an Independent Chair and that meets monthly. The independent Chair reports quarterly to the Minister for Children on the progress Medway is making in relation to improving safeguarding arrangements and services for looked after children.
- 2.3 The Chair wrote a progress report to the minister in October 2013. The Lead member for Children's Services and senior officers met with the DfE Improvement Team during a visit to Medway in November 2013. Both the contents of the report and feedback following the visit concluded that whilst signs of progress and developments were at an early stage, improvements were picking up pace and the focus on children, quality of the work and management and leadership grip was turning the curve.
- 2.4 Numbers of Looked After Children in Medway has shown a steady drop since a peak in Q3 11/12 of 449 to a current figure of 374. Our compliance with statutory visits to children in care remains consistently high. Areas requiring continued improvement and greater focus (outlined in the following report) include timeliness of Initial Health Assessments, quality of plans, improvement in completion and quality of Personal Education Plans (PEPs), and reduction in timescales in court and placement of children with adopters once a Placement Order is made.

3. Areas of Progress

- 3.1 The single Improvement Plan including actions in relation to safeguarding and looked after children's services was signed off at the External Improvement Board.
- 3.2 A multi-agency launch event in October 2013 of the Improvement Plan, and the 'Plan on Page' widely distributed to partner agencies. The 5 key themes of the plan are (i) quality and effectiveness of services, (ii) workforce and capability, (iii) performance management, (iv) partnership and early help, and (v) leadership and governance.
- 3.3 Three out of four key Service Manager posts have been recruited to permanently and month on month improvements are seen in retention and recruitment rates, although the latter remains a challenge, albeit an improving picture. Caseloads have been reduced across the service and additional investment in CSC from 2014/2015 will ensure sufficient Social Worker numbers to sustain this level and a continued focus on quality.
- 3.4 Medway has been headline sponsor for 2 recent national recruitment conferences in November raising the profile of the council and encouraging a number of potential applications for permanent social work staff and managers.

- 3.5 Medway's Corporate Parenting is being strengthened under the new and proactive leadership of the Lead Member for Children's Services (LMCS), Councillor Mike O'Brien. A new LAC Strategy was signed off at the last Corporate Parenting Group and agreed sub-groups (including health, educational attainment, housing and accommodation) will report to Corporate Parenting Group (CPG) in January 2014 and routinely thereafter. This will be a key driver toward continued and sustained improvement. A recent decision by the CPG has included prioritising apprenticeship opportunities for LAC 16+ within the Council and its contracted services.
- 3.6 LAC performance data are now scrutinised on a fortnightly basis by the children's social care management team and monthly case file audits inform targeted training plans for social workers and managers. A multi-agency LAC performance dashboard is being developed for the next Corporate Parenting Board in January 2014.
- 3.7 Case file audits have shown early signs of improvement in the quality of frontline practice and management oversight, and there has been a recent 'case in context' audit of adoption arrangements for children in care leading to an action plan to improve performance further.
- 3.8 A visit to the London Borough of Lambeth Looked After Children's Services, rated 'outstanding', was undertaken by the senior managers and the LMCS in September 2013. A number of areas for learning and development have been taken forward for implementation. It is planned that further visits will take place to good or outstanding authorities to ensure we are continually learning.
- 3.9 There is a review underway of all external placements for looked after children as part of developing a clear Placements Strategy which will drive the commissioning of an improved range of good quality and effective local placements for Medway's children and young people, with a focus on improving outcomes.
- 3.10 In order to address drift and delay in the system for children in care, a monthly Permanency Panel has been established to address the timeliness of planning, and Medway continues to improve its performance in timescales for Court proceedings which has gone from 50+ weeks to 37 weeks over a 6 month period.
- 3.11 The LAC Health Team have received additional resources and are in the process of recruiting additional nursing capacity, and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) provision for children in care is being reviewed with a possibility of re-commissioning mental health and emotional well-being services for this cohort.
- 3.12 Medway Council has recently pledged to adopt the new national Runaway's Charter, and this will add additional strength to the Children Missing from Care protocols positively commented on by Ofsted in the inspection of Looked After Children's services.

- 3.13 The Medway Safeguarding Children's Board (MSCB) has agreed that young people, including those in care, should be represented as a core part of its work, and the Board Manager is agreeing an appropriate mechanism for meaningful participation.
- 3.14 A Leaving Care Team has now been established for those LAC entering adulthood to focus on improved support around accommodation, education, employment and training options post 18, and separate premises are being sought for this group of young people as a hub of multi-agency support, in partnership with Medway Youth Trust.
- 3.15 An Escalation Protocol has now been circulated to ensure that where there are concerns and challenge raised by Independent Reviewing Officers as to the timeliness and quality of planning for Looked After Children by Social Workers, these are then fed up appropriately. There is increasing evidence that this new protocol is being used appropriately.
- 3.16 There was a recent Time To Shine event in November celebrating achievements of our looked after children and care leavers, a well-publicised football match between Council staff and the Children in Care (CiC) Council, and a launch of the Big Difference website hosted by the Young Lives Foundation.
- 3.17 A new children and young people's complaints leaflet has now been widely distributed, and supplements postcards developed by the CiC Council which enable LAC to readily and accessibly feedback their view to services.
- 3.18 The CiC Council meets regularly and is now attended by the LMCS and AD for CSC for part of that meeting. The LMCS had led discussions around the CiC council being represented and presenting to the Corporate Parenting Board, full Council and the MSCB.
- 3.19 On 22 November 2013 a number of looked after children and the CiC Council undertook a 'taking over' day as part of the young commissioners initiative which saw them spend time meeting a wide range of teams and staff across departments, formulating and asking probing questions, and delivering a presentation of their findings at the end of the day to a number of senior officers and the LMCS. There will be an action plan developed from this and a 'You Said, We Did' meeting in 6 months time to check on progress and delivery of those actions.

4. Next Steps

- 4.1 The Department for Education expects a Local Authority in the position Medway is currently in to be subject to an Improvement Notice for a minimum of approximately 2 years. Ofsted does not usually return in the first 12 months of an Improvement Notice, but they have the powers to do so if they so wish, and will now inspect under the new framework. It is anticipated that Ofsted's next inspection will be sometime in 2014.

- 4.2 The Director of Children and Adults Services has separately commissioned independent external audits of the Virtual School for looked after children that occurred at the end of November 2013 and a week long Peer Review arranged via the LGA for week beginning 24 February 2014.
- 4.3 In addition to this, the Improvement Board Chair undertook a 'deep dive' inspection over 2 days in early December.
- 4.4 All these processes, whilst they will reveal continued areas for learning and improvement, will be invaluable in Medway knowing itself better, taking appropriate action and preparing for future re inspection by Ofsted.

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 implemented to oversee the immediate and longer-term service improvements, and to ensure that they are delivered at the required pace of change and to the requisite standards. The external Children's Board has 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 monthly Improvement Board and will be subject to internal and external scrutiny and validation.

6. Financial and legal implications

- 6.1 In addition to previously agreed resources to support improvements in services to children following the inspection of safeguarding arrangements for children in January 2013, the draft budget proposals considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 26th November recommended a further £800,000 addition to the 2014/15 base budget to ensure sufficient social worker capacity, and to reduce case loads to an acceptable and sustainable level.
- 6.2 The Ofsted report acknowledges that there are no children at immediate risk, and as such the Council is not in breach of any statutory duty. Legal Services will continue supporting Children Services in pursuing their improvement journey.

7. Recommendation

- 7.1 The Cabinet is asked to note the updates of progress highlighted in this report.

8. Suggested reasons for decision

- 8.1 To inform the Cabinet of 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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