

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

1 OCTOBER 2020

REPORT ON OFSTED MONITORING VISIT

Report from: Ian Sutherland, Director of People – Children and Adults

Author: Sue Brunton-Reed, Head of Improvement

Summary

This report provides an overview of the recent Ofsted Monitoring Visit of Children's Services, which took place on the 20 and 21 August 2020.

This was the first Monitoring Visit since the July 2019 Ofsted Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS), which graded the service as Inadequate overall. Monitoring Visits by Ofsted had been scheduled for March and June 2020 but were postponed due to Covid restrictions.

This visit was undertaken remotely by two Ofsted inspectors, Matthew Reed and Amanda Maxwell. The focus of the visit was assessment, and the interface with early help, the quality of initial decision making, the timeliness of service provision and the quality of initial assessment and planning.

In line with the Ofsted guidance, the report of the first Monitoring Visit is not published but is shared with the authority to inform ongoing improvement priorities.

This report provides the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee with a summary of the findings, the progress noted by the inspectors and the areas for ongoing improvements to the service.

1. Budget and policy framework

- 1.1. This report supports the Council Plan priority "Supporting Medway's people to realise their potential' to achieve the outcome 'Resilient Families'.
- 1.2. In January 2018, Ofsted launched the Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services' of ILACS, the framework for inspecting local authority services for children in need of help and protection, children in care and care leavers.

2. Background

- 2.1. The Ofsted 'Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services' (ILACS) took place from 15 to 26 July 2019 and the report was published on the 27 August 2019. The serviced was judged to be Inadequate overall.
- 2.2. The Committee has received progress reports on improvement activity at its December 2019, January, March and June 2020 meetings.
- 2.3. The Commissioner, Eleanor Brazil, submitted her initial report to the Secretary of State, on 2 December 2019, and her updated report in July 2020.
- 2.4. An Improvement Board, chaired independently by Rory Paterson, meets monthly to oversee progress on the Improvement Plan, which was refreshed and updated in July 2020.

3. Summary of monitoring visit

- 3.1. This visit was undertaken off-site, utilising information technology and video conferencing to facilitate child and service-related discussions between inspectors and local authority social workers, managers, and leaders.
- 3.2. The inspectors found that the local authority has made initial progress in improving services for its children and young people. They recognised the targeted investment in the service and noted that a well-planned realignment of the teams has laid the foundations for practice to change and improve, which are beginning to have a positive effect.
- 3.3. There was recognition that the local authority has completed a wide range of diagnostic work, and has embraced the support of improvement partners, to consider the areas that need to improve most to ensure that children are safeguarded.
- 3.4. Inspectors noted the benefit of a permanent senior management team in post and additional investment in staffing which has contributed to vastly reducing caseloads to manageable levels in the assessment teams. Senior managers are now realistic about current practice issues.
- 3.5. The additional 35 social work posts which have been created across the service have increased the capacity to complete work with families when they are referred to children's services. This was recognised as a significant improvement compared with the situation at the time of the inspection.
- 3.6. Although a model of social work practice has been introduced, and staff welcome this, it is not yet being used in practice consistently enough to have a significant impact on interventions with families. This remains an area requiring focus of attention.
- 3.7. However it was noted that families receive the right service which matches their need, and thresholds are appropriately applied. Effective management

oversight within the MASH ensures that there is rarely delay in offering a service to families. Assessments are completed promptly with clear evidence that children are seen, and their views are considered, although further work is required to improve the analysis of risk and need.

- 3.8. The benefits of partnership working in the MASH were noted and inspectors supported the plan to consult with partners with a view to reviewing and updating the multi-agency Threshold Document.
- 3.9. The quality of plans and planning for children needs to improve. The specific needs of each child are not well identified, and many planned interventions do not include timescales to enable effective tracking of progress and outcomes.
- 3.10. Children and families were found to step up from early help to statutory services appropriately, although early help assessments vary in quality and some were found to lack analysis of the child and family's needs.
- 3.11. However, threshold decisions about stepping children down from child in need support to early help were found to be inconsistent and inspectors noted that at times social workers withdraw without a period of oversight to monitor that changes in the family have been sustained.
- 3.12. A more robust approach to quality assurance has ensured that practice deficits and recurring themes are identified and inform service improvements. The inspectors agreed with the moderated audit grades for all six cases which they tracked.
- 3.13. Inspectors commented that the quality of management oversight and direction is not yet consistently contributing to effective planning. Although supervision is occurring regularly and there is evidence of management oversight, more work is needed to ensure that managers challenge social workers and facilitate reflective discussion.
- 3.14. Recruitment and retention of social workers remains problematic which is being addressed through the introduction of a more structured career pathway and a firmer focus on creating a more positive working environment. The social workers and managers spoken to during the visit were positive about working in Medway and said that managers at all levels are supportive and available and that they are given the opportunity to develop.
- 3.15. Inspectors considered the impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and noted that creative methods of seeing and speaking with children have had to be utilised, using direct and virtual contact. It was also noted that senior managers are actively planning for any potential surge in future demand as a result of Covid 19.
- 3.16. It was positive to hear that there were no children who were considered by inspectors to be at risk of harm.

4. Risk management

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Actions are not implemented in a timely manner	If the actions within the Improvement Plan are not implemented in a timely manner, or do not have impact on children and families, then children & young people may remain at risk of harm.	The Improvement Board will monitor progress and will hold the service to account if progress is not positive. Regular management oversight within the service, and increased quality assurance activity will provide assurance of individual children's safety.	B2
Resource is not in place to deliver rapid improvement	The authority cannot evidence it has sufficient capacity to maintain the necessary long-term sustainable improvement to Children's Social Care.	The Local Authority and its partners will commit to support the improvement journey.	C3
The Council loses control of Children's Social Care Services	In cases of persistent or systemic failure there is a presumption that children's social care services should be removed from local authority control, for a period of time, in order to bring about sustainable improvement, unless there are compelling reasons not to do so.	The leadership of the council will prioritise the needs of children. This will be reflected in corporate decision making, action and active attendance at key committees and boards The Chief Executive and Lead Member will ensure they are well informed and will hold the DCS and their leadership team to account for the quality of practice and the challenges in the local area.	C3
Recruitment & retention	Challenges relating to recruitment & retention of Social Workers increase due to the Ofsted judgement, and to the current Covid pandemic.	An engagement forum has been introduced and continues virtually under current arrangements to support staff and ensure they recognise they are valued and their views are welcomed. HR has produced a Workforce Development Strategy and continues to actively pursue recruitment	C3

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
		during this time and offer online interviews.	
Financial Implications	<p>Improving Children's Services will bring with it financial implications. This will create additional budget pressures for the authority.</p> <p>The additional obligations to maintain a service during the Covid pandemic and manage a potential surge in referrals will also have financial implications.</p>	<p>Identify appropriately skills to ensure effective budget oversight and management and identify all opportunities for efficiency in service delivery.</p> <p>Ensure an accurate record is maintained of all expenditure directly relating to Covid pressures, and plan with partners to effectively respond to any surge in demand.</p>	B2
Caseloads	<p>Whilst additional resource has been introduced to reduce caseloads, there is a risk that the pressure of the Covid restrictions will create additional stress in families and lead to an increase in the number of referrals, which will require further Social Work resource.</p>	<p>Ensure engagement with partners and community support resources is increased to support provision of services to children and families and reassure all that safeguarding children is a priority for Medway</p>	C3

5. Implications for looked after children

- 5.1. The specialist teams for children in care, in place following realignment, will offer looked after children an improved service. Practitioners will be enabled to prioritise permanency planning and direct work, which will support better outcomes for our children in care.

6. Financial implications

- 6.1. Improving Children's Services has created additional budget pressures and £7.6m of additional funding has been made available to the service through the 2020-21 budget setting process and the improvement action plan. The additional funding has been made available, to substantially increase the staffing establishment for Children's Social Care (including the budgets which form part of Children's Social Care but reside within Children's divisions) as well as the non-staffing budgets, such as budgets that relate to financial support for care leavers as an example.

6.2. There is a need for urgency and pace, to demonstrate that the Council has the capacity to make the required changes.

6.3. The service will continue to work with colleagues from across the Council to identify opportunities to use resources more effectively, in order to deliver service improvement including working closely with corporate finance colleagues to ensure accurate and robust forecasting.

7. Legal implications

7.1 This and future Ofsted inspection of Children's Services lay the regulatory foundations for meeting the statutory requirements for Medway Council

8. Recommendations

8.1. The Committee is asked to note the report.

Lead officer contact

Lee Anne Farach, Assistant Director, Early Help and Children's Social Care,
Tel: 01634 331215 Email: leeanne.farach@medway.gov.uk

Sue Brunton-Reed, Head of Improvement,
Tel: 01634 334160 Email: sue.bruntonreed@medway.gov.uk

Appendices

None

Background papers

None