

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

5 AUGUST 2021

PROGRESS REPORT - CHILDREN'S SERVICES IMPROVEMENT

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Summary

This report provides the Committee with a progress update on improvement activity in Children's Social Care Services, and the findings of the recent Ofsted Covid Assurance visit, which took place in May 2021.

1. Budget and policy framework

- 1.1 This report supports the Council Strategy 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' (ILACS), the framework for inspecting local authority services for children in need of help and protection, children in care and care leavers. This framework outlines the responsibilities of both local authorities and Ofsted following an 'Inadequate' judgement.
- 1.3 Ofsted suspended visits in March 2020 because of Covid restrictions but resumed Assurance Visits in September 2020. These Assurance Visits have been undertaken as part of Ofsted's phased return to routine inspections. They do not take place under the common inspection framework, but focus on evaluating the following:
 1. the experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account the COVID-19 context
 2. how well children and young people are helped and protected
 3. the effectiveness of leadership and management, including arrangements to meet the needs of children as restrictions are eased

1.4 Providers are not graded following the Assurance Visits but receive verbal feedback on conclusion of the visit and a report for publication on the Ofsted website.

2. Background

2.1 The Ofsted ILACS took place in Medway Children's Services from 15 to 26 July 2019 and the report was published on the 27 August 2019. Medway's children's services were graded inadequate.

2.2 The Department for Education (DfE) issued a statutory direction to Medway Council due to poor performance in Children's Social Care Services and an independent Children's Services Commissioner, Eleanor Brazil, was appointed by the Secretary of State.

2.3 The Commissioner made her final report to the Secretary of State in December 2020 and recommended that Medway had the capacity to continue to run its children's service and was committed to make the necessary improvements. The Secretary of State amended the Statutory Direction, ended the role of the Commissioner, and appointed an Improvement Adviser, Gladys Rhodes White to work with the service and the Improvement Board to build on and sustain improvements underway.

2.4 The Council have developed and regularly updated an Improvement Plan for the delivery of services which is overseen, challenged and supported by the Improvement Board, independently chaired by Rory Paterson, a former Director of Children's Services for Thurrock.

2.5 The plan was most recently refreshed and updated in May 2021 to take into account the significant work undertaken and to set out the next stage of improvement, which is to embed the changes and monitor the impact on children and families.

2.6 The Committee has received progress reports on improvement activity at its December 2019, January, March, June and October 2020 meetings.

3. Ofsted Assurance Visit

3.1 The Ofsted Assurance Visit took place on 25 and 26 May 2021. A team of five inspectors undertook the visit virtually and used video calls for discussions with staff, children, managers and leaders within the local authority.

3.2 The inspection team found that an increasingly stable senior leadership team has made progress in developing the necessary foundations to develop and improve the consistency and quality of practice. There is a relentless focus on improvement and a determination to embed change across the service.

- 3.3 They found that leaders have a good grasp of the quality of social work practice throughout the service. Leaders know themselves well and have a thorough understanding of the service's strengths, as well as the areas that require further development to improve practice and services for children.
- 3.4 No child was found to be at risk of harm and there were no priority areas for action identified.
- 3.5 Assessment of need and risk was found to be thorough and detailed, and when COVID-19 infection rates were at their highest, individual assessments of risk enabled the local authority to ensure that the most vulnerable children were seen face to face.
- 3.6 Inspectors noted that increased staffing levels have led to a reduction in caseloads, which, in the majority of teams, are now manageable, and social workers have been well supported during the pandemic.
- 3.7 Quality of practice for children in need and in need of protection continues to be variable and when children are on the edge of coming into local authority care, support is not consistently available as part of purposeful intervention with families.
- 3.8 Inspectors noted that the number of care leavers not in education, employment or training is high. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on young people's prospects for apprenticeships, employment and further education.
- 3.9 Areas specifically identified for ongoing improvement include:
 - The analysis of need and planning for children who are at risk of harm and experiencing long-term neglect.
 - Management oversight and case planning for children who are placed at a distance from Medway and children who go missing and are at risk of exploitation.
 - The availability of and access to emotional health and well-being services for older children in care and care leavers.

4. Future oversight of the service from Ofsted

- 4.1. The report of the Assurance Visit was published on 8 July 2021 and is attached at Appendix 1.
- 4.2. Ofsted are planning to resume quarterly Monitoring Visits, and local authorities subject to intervention following an inadequate judgement would normally be subject to at least 6 Monitoring Visits prior to a re-inspection. To date, Medway have had one Monitoring Visit which took place in August 2020.
- 4.3. Ofsted have indicated that the programme of quarterly Monitoring Visits will be agreed before the end of 2021, but a re-inspection is not anticipated before

2023. In the meantime, progress will continue to be overseen by the Improvement Board and the DFE adviser, who report quarterly to the DFE.

5. Priorities for ongoing improvement

5.1 The Improvement Plan was revised and updated and signed off by the Improvement Board in May 2021. The five key pillars of the plan:

- Quality of Practice
- Capacity and Capability of the workforce
- Leadership
- Quality Assurance
- Partnership working

remain the same, with actions, timescales and evidence of impact updated to reflect progress made.

5.2 Specific priorities under each section of the plan are as follows:

5.2.1 Quality of Practice

- Implementation of our practice model, Signs of Safety
- Clear Practice Standards
- Improved practice interventions, particularly in relation to neglect and domestic abuse
- Timely reunification of children in care
- Improved fostering service
- Improved leaving care offer, with more options for accommodation and education, training and employment of our care leavers

5.2.2 Capacity and Capability of workforce

- Effective recruitment processes to maintain supply chain of prospective candidates
- Career development pathway to support retention
- Workforce development
- Staff welfare
- Support, coaching and training for managers
- Staff engagement

5.2.3 Leadership

- Corporate support and governance
- Child Friendly Medway
- Senior Leader engagement and line of sight into operational service delivery
- Staff engagement at all levels
- Robust financial planning and resource management

5.2.4 Quality Assurance

- Participation and engagement of children and young people as part of a QA Framework
- Audit as a tool to drive up performance
- Embed all QA processes to drive improvement and ensure pace

5.2.5 Partnerships

- Early Help
- Domestic abuse
- Contextual safeguarding
- Improved outcomes for Care Leavers in relation to education employment, training, health and accommodation
- Agreed joint commissioning priorities
- Smooth transitions for young people moving into adult services

6. Risk management

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Practice improvements are not implemented in a timely manner, and do not achieve the anticipated impact	If the actions within the Improvement Plan and any other diagnostic activity are not implemented in a timely manner, then Medway's vulnerable children & young people may remain at risk or living in situations of harm.	The Quality Assurance and Performance Board as well as 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.	C2
Recruitment & retention	There are ongoing challenges relating to recruitment & retention of Social Workers.	A Workforce Development Strategy has been developed. A company has been commissioned to utilise social media and focus on Medway as an employer of choice. HR continues to actively pursue the recruitment strategy.	B2

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Financial Implications	Improving Children's Services has had significant financial implications. The risk is that the authority cannot continue to maintain the necessary long-term investment in the service which supports sustainable improvement to Children's Social Care. This will create additional budget pressures for the authority.	The Local Authority and its partners will commit to support the improvement journey, whilst ensuring efficient use of resources and identifying opportunities to achieve savings and efficiency in service delivery.	C2
Caseloads	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 and complexity of referrals, which will require further Social Work resource	Ensure engagement with partners and community support resources is maintained to support provision of early help services to children and families and reassure all that safeguarding children is a priority for Medway. Maintain oversight of contact and referral data and predict and plan for any upward trend	C2

7. Financial implications

- 7.1. Improving Children's Services has created additional budget pressures for the Council. Additional funding for service improvement has been identified and made available to the service through the budget setting process and the improvement action plan.
- 7.2. There is a need for continued urgency and pace, to demonstrate that the Council has the capacity to sustain the required changes.
- 7.3. 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.

8. Legal implications

8.1. The general terms of reference for overview and scrutiny committees require this committee to monitor performance and identify areas for further review and scrutiny (Chapter 4, r.21.1(ix)).

8.2. The terms of reference specific to this committee require it to fulfil all the functions of an overview and scrutiny committee in relation to Children's Social Care including: the children's advice and duty service, Children in Need, Child Protection, Child Adolescent Support, Looked after Children and proceedings, Adoption, Fostering, the Integrated Family Support Service, Children with learning and physical disability and Quality Assurance and Safeguarding (Chapter 4, r.21.2(b)(iii)).

9. Recommendation

9.1 The Committee is asked to note the content of this report and the positive feedback from Ofsted.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Ofsted letter July 2021

Background papers

None