

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

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CHILDREN'S SERVICES IMPROVEMENT UPDATE

Report from: Lee Anne Farach, Director of People – Children and Adults Services

Author: Sue Brunton-Reed, Head of Improvement

Summary

This report provides a progress update on children's improvement activity with specific reference to progress made against the Children's Improvement Plan, developed in response to the Ofsted report following the inspection in July 2019, when the service was graded Inadequate. Three Ofsted Monitoring Visits have taken place in May 2020, July 2021 and January 2022.

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. Medway Children's Services was graded Inadequate at the ILACS in July 2019. This framework outlines the responsibilities of both local authorities and Ofsted following an 'Inadequate' judgement, which includes regular Monitoring Visits from Ofsted inspectors to assess and review progress since the inspection.
- 1.3 Ofsted suspended on site monitoring visits in March 2020 because of Covid restrictions but resumed in May 2020, when Medway's first Monitoring Visit took place remotely. Two further visits have now taken place in July 2021 and January 2022.
- 1.4 Children's Services are not graded following the Monitoring Visits but receive verbal feedback on conclusion of the visit and from the second visit onwards, a report for publication on the Ofsted website.

1.5 The framework requires Ofsted to carry out between four and six monitoring visits prior to a re-inspection.

2. Background

2.1 In response to an inadequate judgement, the Local Authority is required to work to an Improvement Plan, overseen by an Improvement Board, which sets out how Medway will improve practice across children's services and how all partners will work together to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and their families in Medway.

2.2 The first plan (October 2019) set out the foundations which needed to be in place, including identifying a significant initial resource requirement, to progress the improvement journey. The Board have regularly reviewed progress on the plan which is updated annually to reflect the progress made and sets out the priorities for the coming year.

2.3 A copy of the 2021-22 Plan on a Page is attached as Appendix 1. A further update on the plan for 2022-23 will be shared with the Improvement Board in March 2022.

2.4 The Secretary of State appointed a Commissioner, Eleanor Brazil, following the outcome of the inspection, who concluded her work in December 2020, with a recommendation that Medway had the capacity and capability to continue to deliver children's services and make the required improvements. The DFE accepted her recommendations and appointed an Improvement Adviser, Gladys Rhodes White who is currently working to support the service in its improvement work. She is a member of the Improvement Board.

2.5 Ofsted carried out their third Monitoring Visit in January 2022, focusing on children in care. The letter summarising the findings of this visit will be published on 1st March and will be circulated as Appendix 2 to the report once available.

2.6 Ofsted have confirmed that the next Monitoring Visit is likely to take place in May 2022, with a focus on children and young people leaving care.

3. Summary of progress against the Improvement Plan

3.1 Quality of Practice

Signs of Safety

3.1.1 Signs of Safety is the practice model in use across all service areas and is supported by a training programme for practitioners, managers and partners. A practice development lead has been appointed into the Principal Social Work team and supports the service through training, group supervision, case mapping and individual mentoring where required. The practice model is beginning to have an impact as recognised by Ofsted. Further work is

underway to adapt the forms used in our recording system, Mosaic, to ensure they are fit for purpose and support good quality practice.

Early Help

- 3.1.2 The Early Help Partnership Board now meets regularly, and partners are committed to working together. The in-house early help service has been realigned to focus on Tier 3 interventions and has been renamed Family Solutions. The location of the Early Help hubs in the community and the fact that they are co-terminus with the realigned children's social work teams has supported joint working through Covid with the hubs remaining open to families during this time. The service is currently working to capacity, supporting families who do not meet the statutory threshold for a social care intervention or who have stepped down from an assessment of child in need plan. The increased demand for the service has resulted in some delays for families in allocating early help workers.

Children's Social Work

- 3.1.3 Following the increase in social work posts and the realignment of the service into assessment, specialist children's social work teams working with child in need and child protection work, an adolescent service, and children in care, 16+ and leaving care teams, it has been possible to maintain average caseloads within target (22 in assessment and 15 in post assessment teams) across most service areas, although the highest caseloads have exceeded target regularly and this is kept under review.
- 3.1.4 The assessment service is currently under considerable pressure managing increased referrals following the return of schools post covid and the two child deaths elsewhere in the country highlighted in the national media. As a consequence of that, caseloads are higher than target (highest is 43 and twelve workers are currently above target). Although we have consistently tried to recruit in this area, with active work underway and agreement for additional staff, recruitment nationally remains a significant challenge
- 3.1.5 Numbers of children subject to child protection plans have significantly reduced from a high of 459 at end of March 2020, to 179 at end January 2022. Further work is underway to calibrate application of the threshold, ensure that the right children are subject to the right plan and risk is being appropriately identified.
- 3.1.6 Recent audit and other quality assurance (QA) activity has demonstrated that practice is still not proactive enough, leading to increasing concern and emergency action for children in response to neglect and pre-birth planning because of indecisive action. Pre-proceedings work with families, which supports change through a legal framework of assessment and planning, is still not always used in a timely way.
- 3.1.7 The number of children subject to children in need plans has also reduced slightly (428 at end January 2022, compared to 486 in September 2020).

Referrals have been lower during the pandemic but there has been an anticipated increase in referrals now that children have returned to schools

- 3.1.8 The focus of attention in the service continues to be on the quality and consistency of our practice, identified by Ofsted and by our own QA activity as still requiring further improvement, and the importance of understanding the child's lived experience, responding in a timely way to risk.

Adolescent Service

- 3.1.9 The Adolescent Service is now located at the Elaine Centre and is developing their work with young people who are impacted by risk outside the family, particularly gangs, exploitation, going missing and serious youth violence. A Child Exploitation Strategy has been agreed by Medway Safeguarding Children Partnership and a multi-agency panel is in place which tracks and reviews children at risk of exploitation. This is an area of multi-agency work which requires further development and will remain a focus of the improvement plan.

0-25 Children with Disabilities

- 3.1.10 Responsibility for the 0-25 social work service moved from Education to Children's Services in November 2020, with an expectation that workers in the service would undertake all safeguarding and court work for the children in their service. It has become evident that the quality and timeliness of the work with children and families required additional attention and some targeted work has been carried out with support from Essex as our Partners in Practice to ensure that plans are in place for all children, and are regularly reviewed, including those who are in receipt of a support package and subject to annual review only. There is further work to do to right size the establishment in this service as well as strengthen practice, and work is underway to progress the actions needed.

Children in care and leaving care

- 3.1.11 Numbers of children in care have reduced slightly over the last year (433 down from 469), and care leavers have increased from 149 to 168. Work on planning for permanence has increased and there is now a more robust process in place to ensure that every child in our care has a permanence plan which is progressed and overseen.
- 3.1.12 The impact of Covid has resulted in some delays in accessing specialist assessment for the courts and in concluding legal proceedings, which has delayed permanency planning for some children.
- 3.1.13 There is further work to do with our partners in commissioning to ensure that sufficiency of placements is increased and the reliance on external placement is reduced. Placement availability is becoming a significant problem across the whole service and is having an impact on stability and permanency for

children, particularly those young people who are placed in unregistered provision and require additional focused activity to reduce the associated risks. Medway awarded a contract for a new residential assessment unit for four children, Eden House, which is now open.

3.1.14 Employment education and training (EET) opportunities for our care leavers continues to be a challenge (young people not in employment, education or training is 48%), which has been exacerbated by the impact of Covid. Our care leavers engagement in EET declined significantly during covid, to a low of 30% in September 2021 but this is starting to improve now that restrictions have been reduced. Work in this area is being supported by the appointment of an aspirations officer to bring real focus on promoting young people's engagement in EET.

Fostering Service

3.1.15 The Fostering Service has had agreed additional 'invest to save' resource to increase the numbers of in-house carers and develop their skills to enable them to care for young people with more challenging behaviours and complexity of needs. This work, which is in its early stages, will reduce the reliance on more expensive independent fostering placements and residential provision. This is particularly important at a time when placements nationally are scarce, and choice of placement is very limited for our children in care.

3.1.16 The investment included restructuring the service so that it had a specific recruitment service. Active work is taking place to improve recruitment of foster carers, but this has been challenging and the recruitment target has not yet been met. Covid has resulted in some carers making different life choices, and a number of our in house carers have recently retired.

3.2 Capacity and Capability of Workforce

3.2.1 The investment in the service over the last two years increased capacity with 35 additional social worker and manager posts. The workforce strategy is regularly reviewed.

3.2.2 Medway's current agency rate is 20%, down from over 30%, but there continues to be turnover of staff across the service although this has stabilised more recently. There has been a quarterly downward trajectory in new permanent starters, from a high of 28 between October and December 2020, to 8.5 in July to September 2021. Permanent leavers have increased over this period from 7 in October to December 2020, to 16.5 in July to September 2021. Recruiting experienced and capable social workers remains a priority for the service.

3.2.3 Medway Children's Services is working closely with HR colleagues to drive recruitment and support retention. A number of initiatives are in place including:

- Two employees on a social work apprentice programme which will end in February 2023
- Six Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSW) who joined in October 2021
- Five students who have started the Step Up to Social World programme in January 2022 – this is an intensive 14 month programme funded by the DFE, and those who are successful will join Medway as NQSEs in April 2023.
- HR colleagues have undertaken a benchmarking exercise on salaries and continue to carry out exit interviews to inform retention strategies
- The Principal Social Worker is also undertaking ‘staying’ interviews to find out from those staff who remain with Medway what factors support them to remain. On a positive note, the majority of staff who contribute to exit interviews say that they would return to work in Medway and would recommend it to colleagues.

3.2.4 Staff Engagement has been challenging during the Covid pandemic with more staff working from home. Plans are in place to re-establish regular practice based whole service staff events now that restrictions are easing. The Staff Reference Group, which includes representatives from every service area, has continued to meet, and two members of this group who are front line practitioners, sit on the Improvement Board and have a regular agenda item to feedback the views of practitioners. A record is maintained of issues raised and solutions agreed, which has included car parking permits for staff undertaking home visiting, support for home working, and a focus on recruitment and career development.

3.2.5 A staff survey was carried out in October 2021, to review our Children’s Services workforce strategy to ensure it clearly links to the strategic priorities of the service and identify the workforce needs for the future. The information gathered as part of this process, will be used to refresh and update the Workforce Strategy, planned for April 2022.

3.2.6 Recruiting a stable workforce remains a priority and additional resources have been made available through the DFE to support this work.

3.3 Leadership and Governance

3.3.1 Following the initial investment of £1.5m to support additional staff, a further financial commitment of £2.4m was agreed for 2019-20 and a total investment of £7.6m in Children’s Services in 2020/2021 and a further £6.0m in 2021-22. This is in addition to a non-recurring improvement fund for 2021-22 of £0.6m.

3.3.2 It is essential that delivery of children’s services is sustainable and investment in the improvement journey is maintained. The Council’s financial strategy is aimed at driving out inefficiencies and improving performance management so that the service can be delivered within a sustainable cost envelope, but the service is currently at a critical stage in delivering improvements and requires corporate commitment to maintain this.

- 3.3.3 Elected members have undertaken training workshops to enhance their ability to understand the service, and be able to challenge and support, particularly within Corporate Parenting Board and Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Senior leaders including the Lead Member, the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive hold monthly performance oversight meetings with the Director and Assistant Director and are also members of the Improvement Board. The Lead Member and Director also take part in regular safeguarding visits alongside social workers to better understand and be able to challenge practice.
- 3.3.4 The local authority has been supported by the Children's Improvement Board, which is independently chaired by Mr Rory Patterson, former Director of Children Services (DCS) at Thurrock. Regular leadership meetings take place with the DFE Improvement Adviser who, together with the Improvement Board Chair, report regularly to the DFE.
- 3.3.5 A Child Friendly Medway (CFM) Board has been established and a significant piece of consultation and engagement has taken place with young people across Medway to identify priorities for the CFM plan.

3.4 Quality Assurance

- 3.4.1 A monthly case audit programme takes place, and all managers now audit cases. Consistency of auditing has been addressed through targeted coaching and support for auditors, as well as external moderation of all audits undertaken. Learning from audits is addressed through individual discussion with the social worker and manager, and through practice workshops facilitated by the Principal Social work team.
- 3.4.2 Additional resources to support quality assurance work has been made available from the DFE and is being used to identify and target practice improvement and support development and implementation of a more comprehensive quality assurance plan for the year ahead.
- 3.4.3 Driving improvement in the quality of our practice remains challenging but we are confident we now have the right structure in place and a leadership team who are supporting implementation of our plan. There will be a focus on child centred practice over the next year, supported by dip sampling by managers and workshops for practitioners.
- 3.4.4 A Quality Assurance and Performance Board (QAPIB) chaired by the Director of People, meets every other month, and oversees and challenges all aspects of the Improvement Plan. Papers are presented and actions agreed in relation to stubborn areas of practice highlighted through performance data or audit.
- 3.4.5 Weekly performance clinics with managers monitor compliance with all performance indicators with a more recent focus on quality of intervention and impact on children.

3.5 Partnership and Engagement

3.5.1 Key partners are represented on the Improvement Board and encouraged to contribute to activity in support of the improvement plan. Whilst partnership working is positive in many areas of improvement activity (Mash Strategic Board, Early Help Partnership Board, Contextual Safeguarding Strategy group, Medway Safeguarding Children Partnership, regular meetings with head teachers), the Improvement Board is keen to support further engagement of partners in the implementation of the plan, with a view to sustainable commitment to joint partnership working and shared responsibility in the future, when the Board has concluded its work. This will be a priority over the coming year.

3.5.2 Internal Council partners are also actively involved in support for the Improvement Plan, including contribution to work with our care leavers and children in care.

4 Priorities for 2022-23

4.1 The priorities and focus of activity for the coming year will be incorporated into refreshed Improvement Plan. These include:

- A relentless focus on improving quality of child centred practice and evidencing impact of our work
- Risk assessment and quality of planning and intervention: particular focus on impact of neglect and domestic abuse.
- Working with our commissioning colleagues to improve the sufficiency and choice of placements for our children in care
- Developing our quality assurance activity to provide a line of sight into practice and the impact of our work, and supporting practice development
- Support and development of managers to effectively support, challenge and provide oversight
- Career development for all staff to support retention
- Recruiting and supporting a permanent workforce
- Engaging our partners, internal and external, in ongoing children's improvement, particularly in relation to our most vulnerable children and adolescents
- Monitoring our performance and resource commitment to ensure we achieve best value for money and efficiency

5. Risk management

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Practice improvements are not implemented	If the actions within the Improvement Plan and any other diagnostic activity are not	The Quality Assurance and Performance Board as well as the Improvement Board monitor progress and hold the	C2

in a timely manner, and do not achieve the anticipated impact	implemented in a timely manner, then Medway's vulnerable children & young people may remain at risk or living in situations of harm.	service to account if progress is not made in a timely way. Regular management oversight within the service, focus on child centred practice and increased quality assurance activity provides assurance of individual children's safety.	
Recruitment & retention	There are ongoing challenges relating to recruitment & retention of Social Workers.	A Workforce Development Strategy is in place and impact is regularly reviewed with quarterly reports to the Improvement Board. HR continues to actively pursue the recruitment strategy, and the service has developed a business case for additional resources from DFE to support recruitment of additional Newly Qualified Social Workers.	B2
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. A sufficiency plan which supports market management to increase availability of placements will support delivery of planned savings on the placement budget.	B2

6. Financial implications

- 6.1 Improving Children's Services has created additional budget pressures and £7.6m of additional funding was made available to the service in 2020-21 and a further £6.6m in 2021-22 through the budget build process and the improvement action plan. The additional funding has been made available, to substantially increase the staffing establishment for Children's Social Care 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 continued ongoing financial commitment, to demonstrate that the Council has the capacity to sustain the required improvements.

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 There are no legal implications arising directly from this report.

8. Recommendations

8.1. The Committee are asked to note the report.

Lead officer contact

Lee-Anne Farach, Director of People,
01634 331215, leeanne.farach@medway.gov.uk

Donna Marriott, Assistant Director, Children's Services
01634 331205 donna.marriott@medway.gov.uk

Sue Brunton-Reed, Head of Special Projects and Improvement,
01634 334160, sue.bruntonreed@medway.gov.uk

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Plan on a Page 2021-22

Appendix 2 – Monitoring Visit letter (to be circulated on 1 March 2022)

Background papers

None