

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

3 MARCH 2022

ATTENDANCE OF THE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES (LEAD MEMBER)

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Mrs Josie Iles, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services
(Lead Member)

Summary

This annual report provides an account of the role of the Lead Member for Children's Services as identified in the Department for Education Statutory Guidance on the Roles and Responsibilities of the Director of Children's Services (DCS) and the Lead Member for Children's Services (LMCS) (DfE 2012). This report details the areas covered by the Lead Member for Children's Services and covers the period from February 2022 until March 2023.

1. Budget and policy framework

1.1. The Statutory Guidance was originally published in 2005, reviewed in 2009 and again in 2012. This report reflects the most recent guidance of 2013.

1.2. The Statutory Guidance was published under section 18(7) (Director of Children's Services) and 19(2) (Lead Member for Children's Services) of the Children Act 2004. This means that local authorities must have regard to it and, if they decide to depart from it, they will need to have clear reasons for doing so.

1.3. The Children Act 2004 requires every upper tier local authority to designate a Lead Member for Children's Services. The Lead Member is responsible for leadership, strategy and the effectiveness of education and children's social care. The areas within the terms of reference of this Overview and Scrutiny Committee and covered by the Lead Member for Children's Services according to the Council's constitution are:

- Children's Partnership Commissioning (0-25), including local Safeguarding Children Partnership arrangements
- Children's provider Services (Fostering, Adoption, Supported Accommodation and Residential Care)

- Early Help, including Family Solutions
- Children's Social Care and Safeguarding
- Youth Offending Services, Youth Services, and Inclusion
- SEND & SEND Transport

1.4 Cabinet are responsible for ensuring that income and expenditure remain within the budget approved by the Council. This report sets out how the portfolio holder for Children's Services has supported Cabinet in this responsibility.

2. Background

2.1. This year has continued to be a challenging year because of the Coronavirus Pandemic. Council Services for children and young people have continued to work with our children and families providing support and assistance. We have worked closely with partners, continuing to ensure that together we do everything we can to keep children and young people safe and free from risk of harm. I would like to thank all our staff and partners for their hard work and commitment in these challenging times.

2.2. I would also like to thank Children's Services staff and leaders in Medway for our continued commitment to driving improvement following the Ofsted decision in July 2019. Despite the pressure of the pandemic, I am pleased and proud of the progress that has been made.

2.4 Throughout the year the Service has worked with our Improvement Board, our DFE Advisor, Gladys Rhodes-White, and Essex, as our Partner in Practice, to support implementation of the Children's Improvement Plan.

2.5 Ofsted carried out their second Monitoring Visit in September 2021, and their report recognised that progress continues to be made, although there are some current challenges to this, particularly recent staff turnover. I am pleased to say that they found no child at risk of harm.

2.6 The inspectors noted the following improvements:

- Some encouraging signs of progress in the help and protection that children receive, but still some way to go to tackle the impact for children living with chronic neglect and domestic abuse.
- Social workers know their children well and demonstrate strong ambition to improve their lives. They use creative approaches to build relationships.
- Staff report being well supported and value opportunities for learning and development provided.
- The practice model (Signs of Safety) which has yet to be embedded is beginning to make a difference.

- 2.7 The third monitoring visit took place on 25th and 26th January 2022 with a focus on Children in Care. The results of that visit are due to be published on 1 March 2022.
- 2.8 The focus now is on ensuring these improvements are sustained so Medway's children in need of help, support, care and protection receive the service they deserve. The Service continues to support the implementation of the improvement plan which will deliver positive changes in the lives of Medway's vulnerable children and young people.
- 2.9 Colleagues from partner agencies, including education, health and police, are central to the effectiveness of the board and this is helping to ensure improvements in the support that children receive.
- 2.10 Elected members have been supported to actively respond to their statutory responsibilities and to improve the effectiveness of their leadership and scrutiny function. Monthly performance data following the child's journey is provided to scrutiny Members, which is accompanied by regular data workshops for scrutiny Members to promote better understanding of performance and service delivery. As chair of Corporate Parenting Board, I have also been pleased to work more closely with Medway Children and Young People's Council, to engage with our young people and support them to actively participate in Board meetings, and to develop a themed programme of work for the board.
- 2.11 Internally, the staff reference group gives colleagues working in Children's Services the opportunity to have their input to the improvement journey and provides insight into what it is like to work in Medway Children's services, highlighting areas for improvement. This group is also represented on the Improvement Board.
- 2.12 Over the coming year we will continue to make sustainable improvements to improve the services we provide for Medway's children.

3. Children's Partnership Commissioning (0-25)

- 3.1 The Children's Services Commissioning Team commission providers to deliver services which the Council cannot provide directly. These are across several areas including, floating support, advocacy, supported accommodation, family support services, contact centre, placements, and support for Schools.
- 3.2 The aim is to ensure that all Medway's children are safe, thrive, remain healthy and learn well and get the support they need in a timely way.
- 3.3 The Service has seen an increase in the complexity of young people needing support, particularly in areas such as mental health, self-harm, sexualised and risk-taking behaviours. This has led to increased demands for specialist placements and additional support to wrap around young people.

- 3.4 Actions from the 2020 Sufficiency Strategy are continuing to progress, including the launch of the Children's Assessment Unit (Eden House), and Medway is now part of the regional adoption agency. Work is progressing to enhance support to children on the edge of care. Five Rivers and Eden House gained full Ofsted registration on the 25th of January. Eden House will home 4 young people at any one time. Three young people moved into Eden House during February (two of those young people were previously housed in unregulated provisions) and arrangements are currently being finalised for our fourth young person. Good links have been made with local police, Medway Youth and Library Services and commissioning have weekly meetings to monitor progress and implementation.
- 3.5 Building on this work, Commissioning and Children's Services have been working on a second wave of innovation as part of a refreshed sufficiency strategy for 2022. These plans included a variety of evidenced and need based proposals including strategic partnerships with providers, flexible foster care arrangements, emergency beds and enhanced support for parent and child assessments and placements. Together with the previous year's actions, these provide Medway with a clear vision for sufficiency and link closely to the improvement plan.
- 3.6 A revision of our floating support services and supported accommodation is being planned for 2022 providing a more varied and flexible range of services to support YP and families to stabilise placements and provide evidence-based interventions and support.
- 3.7 Work to improve placement sufficiency has continued to be positive and challenging. Improvements have been made to the way placements are made and the referral process has been strengthened. The Access to Resources team has been building relationships with providers and have managed to place a significant amount of young people over the course of the year. There have been challenges about availability across the whole fostering market nationally, impacting on our ability to place children close to their families and communities, but the aforementioned actions linked to the sufficiency strategy aim to address these shortfalls.
- 3.8 The placements budget has continued to rise in 2021/22 and there remains a number of challenges to achieving reductions in the cost of placements; the increased complexity of children coming into care and the number of children's placements during the pandemic that have broken down, as well as the increased time that court proceedings are taking, all create pressures on the specialist provider market. This has led to a shortage of specialist placements for children with complex needs. The development of a new IFA framework, supported accommodation providers and additional support and capacity for parent and child placements will go some way to address these challenges.
- 3.9 The development of more specialised commissioning arrangements for Education and SEND and an education-based needs assessment and

sufficiency strategy is planned in 2022, as well as a review of current commissioned services.

- 3.10 The priorities in these contracts for the next year remain to ensure good and ultimately outstanding outcomes for our children and young people in Medway.
4. Corporate Parenting and Children in Care (including Adoption, Fostering, Supported Accommodation and Residential Care)
 - 4.1 The Corporate Parenting Service includes four children in care teams, four 16+ care leavers teams, 0-25 Disabilities Service, four Fostering teams and a short break residential home for children with a disability. The Adoption service is now part of Adoption Partnership South East with our regional adoption agency partners, Kent County Council and London Borough of Bexley.
 - 4.2 The number of children in Medway's care stands at 437, as of January 2022. The numbers have fluctuated at around 440 for the last year and shows a longer-term increase on previous years, which is also reflected nationally. The number of referrals into Children's Services for November 2021, were the highest in the last year and nearly double the previous year. The impact of the pandemic on family life and recent child deaths which have dominated the news over recent months are likely to continue to impact on this upward trend.
 - 4.3 Effective permanence planning is critical for every child who comes into care, so that they achieve permanence at the earliest opportunity. Every child is considered at permanence panel within 6 weeks of coming into care and then at regular intervals to ensure that their plans are progressed at pace until the child returns home or an order is made. Plans continue to be monitored until permanence is achieved through adoption, Special Guardianship or long-term fostering. Those children in care in recognised long-term placements have increased from 37% in 2019 to 64% in November 2021.
 - 4.4 Placement sufficiency is a key challenge for the authority, as it is nationally. The pandemic has had a significant impact on foster carers with some resignations as a result of concerns about health, particularly among the significant group of older and more experienced carers. Recruitment of new carers has also been affected with many people being unwilling or unable to make such lifestyle changes during such an uncertain time. This reflects the national picture which shows a growing shortage of foster carers for the increasing children in care population.
 - 4.5 The programme of investment in the fostering service saw the launch of the new payment structure on 1st September 2021. This has been well-received by current carers and is attracting new carers to Medway. The last "Skills to Foster" preparation training for potential new carers attracted 7 new households which is a significant increase on the size of groups during the last 2 years (which have typically been only 2 or 3 households). The next phase of the project will look at targeted therapeutic support to all fostering

placements to support carers to consider older children and those with higher levels of trauma and to support placement stability.

- 4.6 The Connected Carer team within the Fostering Service have taken over responsibility for Special Guardianship support since the formation of Adoption Partnership. They have worked hard over the last year to bring in a dedicated programme of training and support to connected carers which is already proving beneficial to those families and is enabling them to be better prepared for the challenges of looking after a child who has been through trauma and loss.
- 4.7 The Regional Adoption Agency, Adoption Partnership South East, launched in November 2020, is proving to be of benefit to Medway children with adoption plans. More Medway children have been placed in early permanence placements and the numbers of adopters being approved by Adoption Partnership (AP) has ensured that children with placement orders are placed in a very timely way. Only the very small number of children with more complex developmental or medical needs are being advertised nationally to try and find a suitable family. Prior to formation of Adoption Partnership, Medway had a small pool of Medway approved adopters who we could place our children with. If we had no-one within that pool, we would need to go nationally to identify the right match. The long term average numbers of children with Placement Orders in Medway is about 25 and probably around half of those would need to be placed with adopters approved by another agency. We now have access to a much wider pool of adopters through Adoption Partnership than were available previously through Medway's own resources. All but 2 or 3 with complex medical needs have been placed with AP adopters, and those placed include 5 sibling groups of 2 children, the majority of whom would have needed to be advertised nationally previously.
- 4.8 The Leaving Care service has continued to expand to provide more support to those in care over the age of 16+. The Corporate Parenting Board has a Care Leavers Service subgroup, which drives the Local Offer for care leavers. Key priority areas include improving the number of care leavers engaged in education, training and employment.
- 4.9 Key priorities for 2022-23 include:
- Improve placement sufficiency through delivering against the ambitious recruitment strategy and attracting more carers to Medway and sustaining the volume of in-house carers by providing enhanced support to carers.
 - Continue to improve Special Guardianship support to better prepare family members for the task of parenting children who have suffered trauma and loss and to enable more family members to feel confident to care for children in their networks.
 - Continue to improve quality of practice, including evidencing direct work with children to understand their life histories.

- Continue to embed Signs of Safety as our practice model.
- Increase the number of care leavers engaged in employment, education and training.

5. Children's Social Care and Safeguarding Services (including Safeguarding Partnership Business Unit)

- 5.1 The Children's Social Work service comprises five Assessment teams, eight Children Social Work teams and the Family Group Conference Service. The Assessment teams complete assessments of children where there are concerns for their safety or welfare in accordance with our statutory duties and provide short term support to children in need of help and protection.
- 5.2 The Children's Social Work teams provide support to children subject to child in need plans and child protection plans. The aim of the intervention is to address the concerns where children are at risk of harm. Where the concerns can't be addressed with the family and the children are at risk of significant harm, legal advice is sought, and court proceedings are initiated.
- 5.3 The last year we have seen a steady increase in demand in respect of children needing to be assessed. The return of children to school following the easing of restrictions during the pandemic, combined with some high profile media cases involving children who had been fatally harmed in other local authorities, have both been factors in the increases in demand seen in the service. Coupled with difficulties to recruit, this increase in demand has led to some challenges in increased caseloads for social workers in Assessment teams.
- 5.4 Despite the increase in demand, practitioners and managers have worked diligently to complete assessments in a timely way and, on average 97% of assessments were completed in 45 working days. The Service has continued to review its response to children who required further support from Children's Services and found that in most cases children are appropriately signposted to relevant services. There is further work to do to strengthen the quality and depth of assessments which is the focus for continuing improvement.
- 5.5 Social workers in the Children Social Work teams have had more stable caseloads in the last year and have focused on improving the quality of practice and the outcomes for children. They have continued to visit children in person and have held review meetings in line with performance targets.
- 5.6 Staff across the service worked to implement the Signs of Safety practice model and other practice tools, in line with the Service improvement plan to ensure that social workers understand the children's lived experiences better and can target the right support for families.

5.7 Key priorities in 2022-23 include:

- Improve the quality of assessments to avoid repeat referrals and ensure that the right children receive the right support at the right time.
- Continue to focus on quality assurance, including positive use of data, audit and attention to quality of practice as well as compliance with performance indicators.
- Continue to work with Essex Partners in Practice to improve the quality of plans and the support offered to children.

5.8 **Medway Safeguarding Children's Partnership Business Unit**

5.8.1 The MSCP was set up on 2 September 2019 to replace the Local Safeguarding Children Board. These arrangements were in response to the Children and Social Work Act 2017. Medway Council, Kent Police and Kent and Medway Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) are the three safeguarding partners that make up the MSCP. The purpose of the MSCP is to support and enable local organisations and agencies to work together in a system where:

- Children are safeguarded and their welfare promoted
- Partner organisations and agencies collaborate, share and co-own the vision for how to achieve improved outcomes for vulnerable children
- Organisations and agencies challenge and hold one another to account
- There is early identification and analysis of new safeguarding issues and emerging threats
- Learning is promoted and embedded in a way that local services for children and families can become more reflective and implement changes to practice
- Information is shared to support accurate and timely decision making for children and families.

5.8.2 The MSCP Executive is jointly chaired by the three partners on a rotational basis. Paula Wilkins, Executive Chief Nurse, Kent and Medway CCG took over as Chair of the MSCP in September 2021 from Detective Chief Superintendent Andy Pritchard, Kent Police who had been chair from September 2020. The MSCP has nine subgroups in place, four of which are joint Kent and Medway subgroups. All subgroups have representation from the safeguarding partners and relevant agencies and report to the MSCP Executive.

5.8.3 The MSCP has strengthened links with schools and now has a primary and secondary head teacher representative on the Executive as well as seeing an increase in attendance of schools in MSCP events. Kent Police have also invested in 70 Schools Officers which will further embed multiagency working. The Schools Officers will provide a visible and accessible police presence, working closely with young people, parents and carers, the school and partner agencies to increase safety and identify early safeguarding opportunities.

- 5.8.4 The MSCP published the Medway Neglect Strategy in July 2021. The strategy has been developed with multi-agency partners to set out Medway's approach to child neglect. It identifies the key principles under which work around neglect should be undertaken and recognises key priority areas of work in order to ensure continual collective improvement within Medway's response to neglect.
- 5.8.5 The MSCP Independent Scrutineer, Rory Patterson, is currently assessing the impact of local learning reviews in Medway. Rory has been reviewing the findings and learning from recent Learning Lessons reviews and focusing on the impact of the work undertaken by the MSCP and partners considering with agencies and practitioners what has changed as a result of these reviews.
- 5.8.6 The case referral and rapid referral process has been reviewed and the MSCP has had assurance from the national child safeguarding practice review panel that the decision making has been correct and that rapid reviews are comprehensive and identify all the learning. The MSCP has in place a multi-agency audit group, the case file audit group (CFAG), whose role it is to undertake audits to identify good practice and multi-agency learning. In June 2021, the MSCP Executive agreed changes to the audit tool to strengthen the process which included a review of the terms of reference.
6. First Response and Targeted (as opposed to Early Help, including family solutions)
- 6.1 First Response includes the Single Point of Access (SPA) and the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). First Response receive all contacts from members of the public and professionals for early help, statutory intervention and safeguarding concerns. Within the SPA, the initial information provided is reviewed and threshold decisions are made, and when further information is needed the contact is progressed to MASH where this information can be requested to enable a threshold decision to be made.
- 6.2 Targeted Services include the Adolescent Service, Family Solutions, Medway Youth Service and Supporting Families.
- 6.3 The Adolescent service provides support to individual children aged between 11-18 years old who experience missing incidents, serious youth violence, homelessness, criminality, exploitation or poor mental health/social isolation. The team works with children assessed as level 2 (Early Help) and 3 (statutory).
- 6.4 The Adolescent team take referrals direct from First Response and work with children without transferring them unless long term CIC status is met. The team is multi-disciplined including youth mentors, family support workers, early help workers and social workers. They work closely with partners including Kent Police, VRU, YOS, domestic abuse and sexual health services.
- 6.5 In November 2020, the Early Help Partnership Board was established to drive forward a multi-agency approach to strengthen the early help offer to families

across Medway and ensure that children and families receive early support. In July 2021, the Early Help Strategy 2021-2024 was launched sharing one vision, joint priorities and services which are delivered in harmony to ensure the best possible outcomes for our Children and Families in Medway. The Early Help Partnership Board are responsible for evidencing the quality, effectiveness, and impact of the strategy.

- 6.6 Following the establishment of the Early Help Partnership Board, the review and launch of Medway's Threshold Guidance (April 2021) and the development of the Early Help Strategy, Medway Council's Early Help Service realigned and rebranded our offer as Family Solutions. This was to ensure that Family Solutions is considered part of the early help support available to families in Medway, as opposed to the single offer and sharing that early help is everyone's responsibility.
- 6.7 As planned, in April 2021, Family Solutions moved across to MOSAIC (Children's Services recording system) which ensures information is shared across Children's Services.
- 6.8 Family Solutions receive referrals direct from families and partner agencies, families also step across from statutory services. Family Solutions offers families support via targeted intervention or through an Early Help Assessment. Family Solutions also offers support to partner agencies who are leading intervention or assessments. Family Solutions provides a parenting support service that delivers Triple P Primary, Triple P Teen and Triple P ADHD. Over the last 18 months Family Solutions has worked alongside the NSPCC to enable Family Solutions to deliver the DART (Domestic Abuse Recovering Together) programme to families within the service. The team delivered the programme to their first cohort in 2021, finishing in December; feedback gained from children and parents that attended has been extremely positive.
- 6.9 Family Solutions' relationship with children's statutory services continues to strengthen, and they have continued to build on relationships with partners in Education, Health and across Medway. The Early Help SPA is now fully embedded within First Response, ensuring that conversations with partners happen at the earliest opportunity to ensure the right professional is leading the right intervention with families.
- 6.10 All staff within First Response, the Adolescent Service and Family Solutions have now completed signs of safety training and new staff undertake training as part of their induction. This strengths-based model is being embedded within their practice and intervention with families.
- 6.11 The Supporting Families Programme (previously Troubled Families) is a UK Government scheme that was launched in 2011 under the Department for Housing, Communities and Local Government. The programme is currently in phase 2 (initially from 2015 to 2021, and extended a further year to March 2022). The aim of the scheme is to support families to reach their potential, by developing resilience and overcoming difficulties they are facing, including

improving systems and services to work with them. The team responsible for the programme in Medway is the Early Help Transformation Team.

- 6.12 The one-year extension included new targets and associated pro rata funding, with the aim of establishing strong multi-agency local partnerships in every area, and mature local and national data systems, which enable partners to identify families in need of extra help, target services more effectively and track family level outcomes over the long term.
- 6.13 In December 2021, the quarter 2 performance dashboard was released. It reported that Medway had attained 68% (244 families) of outcomes achieved of the overall target in the first two quarters. Evidencing that Medway are attaining higher than the national average (52%) and that we are online to attain our target to achieve 360 successful family outcomes.
- 6.14 The spending review confirmed that this government scheme will continue to be funded until March 2025, and with further details regarding terms and conditions of the grant, how it will be funded and operated over the next 3 years.

7 Inclusion

7.1 The Education team provides a statutory service and support in accordance with Education Acts and the Children and Families Act. It consists of the:

- Inclusion team
- Early Years Sufficiency team and Family Information Service
- School Effectiveness team
- Attendance Advisory team
- Matrix link with MASH education team

7.2 Permanent Exclusion and Suspension Summary

7.2.1 Exclusion data from the academic year 2019/20, reflected a significant milestone in evidencing that Medway's permanent exclusions and suspensions were below the national rate; this was sustained in 2020/21. The trend of reduction in permanent exclusions and suspensions (fixed term exclusion) began in 2016 and has been sustained to the end of the academic year 2020, and into 2020/2021. However, whilst the total number of exclusions is below National, this is not the case for all age groups.

7.2.2 The period in 2020 incorporates the period of national lockdown when the majority of learners were not required to be in school. This downwards trend mirrored the national trend and was below the national exclusion rate. This milestone was achieved within the context of considerable improvement in the understanding of inclusion. It should be noted that there is no published national comparative data for 2020/21 to substantiate this latter assertion.

7.2.3 The period between 2019/20 incorporates the period when the education team secured funding from the Department of Education in order to deliver a programme aimed at improving the culture of inclusion and driving down the need for formal exclusions. During a 18-month period focusing upon inclusion, a number of workstreams supported schools in improving provision. Amongst them was a primary programme, an Alternative Provision review and the collaboration of understanding that resulted in agreed principles for inclusion amongst schools.

7.3 Reasons for Permanent Exclusion

7.3.1 The reasons for the permanent exclusions that were issued during the period between September 2019 and July 2020, tended to match the reasons nationally, with persistent disruptive behaviour most frequently recorded as the reason for permanent exclusion. There were no permanent exclusions from primary or special schools during this period. The number of Medway's learners aged 12-14 (year groups 7-9) excluded permanently exceeded the national profile. Most of these exclusions were prior to lockdown, between September 2019 and March 2020.

7.3.2 Medway Council's local data for 2020/21 shows the reason for exclusions followed the same pattern as the previous year, with persistent disruptive behaviour the most noted reason. Although the volume of exclusions were lower, because of school closures, the groups of learners that received permanent exclusion mirrored previous local and national excluded groups. These groups were disadvantaged learners and those who require SEND support. Comparisons with learner groups in 2020/21 is not possible because the census data is yet to be published.

7.4 Improvement and context for suspensions (fixed term exclusion)

7.4.1 During the period between September 2019 - March 2020, all learners were expected to be in school as usual. During this time Medway suspended fewer learners than they did in the comparable time of the previous year. Similar to permanent exclusions, the reason for the most suspensions was persistent disruption. Whilst both primary and secondary suspensions were below the national rate for the whole year, special school suspensions exceeded the national profile. Comparison of suspensions for the same periods in 2019/202 and 2020/21 are not possible due to different periods of lockdown across the two separate academic years.

7.4.2 During periods of lockdown when the majority of pupils worked remotely, the Inclusion team provided guidance to schools on adapting existing behaviour policies to facilitate a phased return for pupils when schools reopened. This preventative work anticipated an increase in exclusion as pupils returned. The Inclusion team supported schools in undertaking virtual meetings with parents of pupils at risk of exclusion (issued prior to the pandemic) and governors and advised schools in relation to transition arrangements for pupils identified as vulnerable, planning the move from primary into secondary schools. For families and pupils that were known to the Inclusion team, virtual meetings

and phone contact continued throughout the pandemic. Face to face meetings resumed as schools reopened in line with risk assessment within individual settings.

7.4.3 As a result of increased number of enquiries from parents anxious to protect children from the transmission of infection, the Inclusion team provided support and guidance to both parents and schools in relation to formally registering pupils to be electively educated at home. The response from the team was to address concerns in relation to health and safety, encouraging parents to talk with their child's school, understand the risk assessments undertaken and detailed planning in line with government guidance, to facilitate a safe and effective return to school. The Inclusion team provided liaison between school and home throughout this period. The team provided clear explanation when speaking with parents that teaching materials / resources provided during lockdown would not be available when schools were reopened, thus reiterating the benefits of remaining on a school roll. In line with the national position, numbers of pupils formally registered as electively educated at home increased. Data is tracked on a regular basis with increasing scrutiny to identify any correlation between poor pupil attendance, the removal of pupils to formally educate at home, the exclusion of vulnerable pupils and pupils with identified special educational, or other, need.

7.5 Attendance

7.5.1 Attendance Advisory Service to Schools and Academies (AASSA) offers support to schools ensuring children are safe and in receipt of education. The AASSA is in part, a statutory service and also continues to provide a traded service to the majority of schools in Medway.

7.5.2 AASSA works in partnership with schools to monitor and improve school attendance, encouraging schools to challenge absence e.g., requesting medical evidence and not authorising unnecessary absence.

7.5.3 Persistent Absence (PA) data is collected through national census. Schools are notified when their persistent absence and attendance is not in line with national and offered an audit and consultation to improve internal processes and strategic overview.

7.5.4 Statutory support includes the role of prosecuting parents on behalf of Medway Council and the schools/academies when attendance fails to improve, and unauthorised absence continues to be recorded. AASSA also issue penalty notices and present full cases in the magistrates' court, on behalf of all schools/academies for unauthorised absence and unauthorised leave of absence (holiday).

7.5.5 The AASSA team has a designated CME officer who establishes the identity of children residing in their area who are of compulsory school age and not receiving suitable education. This officer is able to locate, assess, monitor and track children and young people missing education.

- 7.5.6 AASSA has a lead officer with responsibility for ensuring that all young people in employment or performance are properly licensed and protected by the current legislation and guidance in place during the course of their education.
- 7.5.7 The impact of the pandemic upon the publication of national data means that no new attendance data is available for publication 2019 to 2021. By the end of 2019, Medway's overall absence was broadly in line with the national profile. Although Medway's persistent absence remained above the national profile, the rate of improvement had been greater than the national rate of improvement. Schools' authorisation of absence is a significant area of challenge. It would appear that an inconsistent response to absence across schools is the main cause of the problem. AASSA await the publication of national Census data (expected March 2022), that will permit communication with schools, where data evidences the need for a more rigorous challenge when pupils are absent from school.
- 7.5.8 During the pandemic there has been a significant increase in persistent absence nationally, as a consequence this is a key focus for Ofsted and the DFE moving forward.
- 7.5.9 Although Medway's overall absence is in line with the national profile in Medway, learners supported with an EHC plan are absent from school the most and are the most persistently absent. Disadvantaged pupils are the second highest groups of learners who miss school, but their absence is not correspondingly persistent.
- 7.5.10 From the beginning of the pandemic the AASSA team provided clarification and operational support to all schools in understanding and responding to guidance that was published from the Department for Education.
- 7.5.11 Attendance practitioners continued to liaise directly with schools to support them with pupil attendance matters, this included contacting vulnerable families to ensure they had access to online/remote learning during periods of lockdown and signposted towards specific agencies on an individual cases by case basis.
- 7.5.12 The Children Missing Education (CME) officer continues to support families moving into Medway. Telephone contact and doorstep visits were made to reiterate the benefits of remaining on a school roll and to support families completing admission forms, following Covid guidelines, ensuring admissions to schools continued, the introduction of pupil/school relationships, school pastoral support and the offer of online/remote learning was available to pupils who were enrolled during periods of lockdown. For families moving into Medway, the CME officer liaises with Social Care and Family Solutions to ensure continuation of support.
- 7.5.13 In addition to supporting schools during the pandemic, AASSA continued with their statutory duty to issue child performance licences. Although there were reduced requests for licences during the pandemic, children who were to feature in Christmas television adverts for example were still requiring a

licence, once risk assessments were scrutinised. This ensured production companies followed covid legislation/guidance.

7.6 Mental Health and Wellbeing

7.6.1 An identified impact of the pandemic and an increasing factor affecting attendance in schools is the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. Evidence suggests that for some cohorts, such as those who are from an economically disadvantaged background, or females with pre-existing mental health needs, the pandemic has had an even greater negative impact on their mental health than their peers.

7.6.2 Schools have a key role in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of pupils and have a statutory duty to promote the welfare of their pupils. Medway Council offer school support through a variety of training and programmes:

- Youth Mental Health First Aid.
- Leading health and wellbeing education within the curriculum.
- Youth Health Champions programme.
- Thrive being embedded in schools through a series of workshops and the development of a Thrive framework tool that helps schools identify the right level of support and services in their area.
- Mental Health Support Teams – initial training programme leading towards accredited mental health practitioners deployed in schools in May 2022.
- The Education Mental Health Leads (in schools) Network.
- Mental Health webinars.
- The Positive Behaviour Support programme.
- Training for Early Years settings.
- Medway Youth Service Participation Team – gathering feedback from experience of using the Mental Health and Wellbeing Services to inform planning and secure improvement.
- The Mental Health directory - online tool to help identify available services.

8. SEND

8.1 The Integrated 0-25 Disability Team provides a statutory service and support in accordance with the Children and Family Act 2014. This team includes:-

- Early Years SEND Team
- Sensory Support Team
- Educational Psychology Team
- SEN Statutory Assessment Team
- Matrix link with 0-25 Social Work Team

8.2 The team is responsible for conducting and overseeing the Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) statutory assessment process, meeting legal requirements, timelines and ensuring special educational provision is in place

to meet pupils' needs. Educational psychologists also have a statutory role in relation to those pupils with SEND.

- 8.3 Ofsted and CQC completed a local area SEND Inspection in December 2017. This inspection looked at how effectively health, education providers and the local authority had introduced the 2014 SEND reforms. A Written Statement of Action outlining the areas of weakness was developed jointly between Medway Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and Medway Council and formed the basis of a plan to address the weaknesses identified.
- 8.4 In December 2019, Ofsted and the CQC returned to complete a SEND Revisit inspection. They found that the local area had made good progress in improving the eight areas of weakness but that there were still some additional improvements required in:-
- The quality of the social care advice contained in EHCPs
 - The strategic SEND Leadership in secondary schools.
 - The communication of the Joint SEND Strategy 2019-22
- 8.5 An Accelerated Progress Plan (APP) was published in February 2020 describing the actions the Council and CCG would complete to address the remaining areas of weakness. This "APP" was monitored by DfE and NHS England in August 2020 and further monitoring meetings took place on 10 February 2021 and 10 September 2021. It was recognised, at the monitoring meeting on the 10th February 2021, that the Education, Health and Care Plans being issued were now of a good quality and that robust auditing and monitoring processes were in place to ensure the quality remained high. We were informed that the required progress had been made in this area and that no further formal monitoring on the quality of the EHCP's would be required. The quality of the EHCP's continue to be audited on a monthly basis and deep dive reports are considered at SEND Partnership Board.
- 8.6 We were pleased to have received a letter from the DfE on 5 October 2021 which stated that the DfE had seen clear and sustained progress meaning that they no longer need to continue with formal monitoring. The letter states that :-
- There is a clearly communicated strategy, understood and shared, and a clear intent to maintain this high level of communication when the new strategy goes out for consultation
 - From their perspective, school and education providers were positive about the improvements in the communication of the strategy
 - The PCF demonstrated their understanding of the strategy and acknowledged that parents understand the content (although some parents may not recognise it as being part of the overall strategy)
 - Leaders across the area fully understand and have a shared willingness to work together to embed the strategy across the SEND system in Medway.

- There are strong systems in place that underpin the assertion that leadership across partners is sufficiently improved.
- Schools and education providers were positive about the improvements from their perspectives on strategic leadership between partners, in particular the accessibility of leaders across the SEND service.
- Education, Health, Parents, the Local Authority and the council are working more effectively to ensure actions taken have a positive impact on the lives of Children and Young People with SEND in Medway.

This clear and sustained progress means that we no longer need to continue with formal monitoring.

8.7 Key achievements include:

8.7.1 Medway Local Area have been released from any further monitoring of their SEND Improvements.

8.7.2 A programme of multi-agency EHCP audits has continued using an audit tool to assess what a “good” plan is. This takes place bi-monthly and a report on the findings and key learning points for improvement is produced and reported to the SEND Partnership Board. Each agency represented on the audit group – health, schools, social care and education is tasked with implementing improvements within their own organisations and reporting back to advice givers in their teams. Providers are expected to have their own internal quality assurance processes in place to ensure compliance with the requirements. This audit process is demonstrating an improvement in the quality of EHCPs being issued with 100% of the plans’ audits being rated as meeting “Good” in the last 8 audits.

8.7.3 We are now issuing 66% of EHCPs within the statutory 20 weeks. The national average is 52%. Close working with the CCG Designated Clinical Officer and Joint Commissioning Team has continued resulting in better partnership working with health services.

8.7.4 Continued training for staff in health providers has taken place on the requirements for writing EHCP advice and reports. This will improve the quality of advice received for EHCPs.

8.7.5 A feedback form is included with every EHCP issued asking parents/carers for the views about the EHC assessment process and about the Plan itself. This feedback informs service improvements. Currently 88% of parents/carers say the EHCP process is helpful and that they were involved in the production of their child’s EHCP.

8.7.6 Increasing the number of Supported Internship Providers in Medway offering over 45 Supported Internship places through to young people with EHCPs. This provision has proved very successful for young people with special educational needs being offered employment after the internship. Places increased again in September 2021.

8.7.7 The full time Local Offer Officer has continued to work with partners on the Local Offer to ensure it is updated and becomes a useful source of information and advice for parents/carers and young people who have special educational needs and disabilities.

8.7.8 Our co-production practice with parents/carers and young people in Medway has developed further. Medway parents/carers now have a voice on most strategic boards across the local authority and health service and the Young Person Disability Group is actively influencing commissioning and service development decisions.

8.7.9 An Ordinarily Available Document has been co-produced with parents, young people, health service partners, schools and colleges. This document sets out what support should be available to children and young people who have special educational needs who attend mainstream provisions in Medway.

8.7.10 The High Needs SEND Budget remains under significant pressure with a further £6.2m overspend forecast for 2021-22. This will increase the cumulative deficit to £20.8m. The deficit recovery plan focused on the following priorities and their associated savings:

- to define and apply the graduated approach with 'needs' vs HN funding
- decommission and commission resourced places in mainstream schools
- implement the planned capital programme to increase Special School places
- consult on a banding system for implementation in the 2021/22 financial year
- propose the funding of both outreach services through a top-slice
- visit all independent providers with a view to improving VFM
- cease non-EHCP top-up aside from exceptional cases (eg trauma)
- disapplication of the 0.5 per cent for 2020/21 and assumption beyond this
- increased HNB budget based on pupil number growth / reduction

8.7.11 When considered in isolation the majority of these activities can be shown to make savings, however the reality of achieving all of these is challenging due to some of the underlying assumptions and the additional pressures savings in one area cause on other parts of the system. For example, an increase in resourced provision capacity is necessary, and compared to the cost of a place in specialist provision does provide a saving, however what we have seen is that the numbers of pupils in specialist provision has continued to increase and the proportion of pupils with an EHC plan in mainstream school has reduced.

8.7.12 Nationally and in Medway there continues to be a significant increase in CYP with EHC plans and requests for EHC plans. Whilst Medway has been very successful in bringing the proportion of its children with an EHCP in line with national, to maintain on the current plan assumptions, it would need to reduce

its annual growth in numbers to 5.9%, compared to a national increase of 12%. This is not a realistic proposition.

8.7.13 In addition, the expected 7% growth or (£3.5m) in High Needs funding over the next 10 years is significantly lower than forecast, dropping to a 5% increase in 2023/24 and 3% thereafter. In real terms a reduction of £9.122m over the remaining life of the plan.

8.7.14 As such the current recovery plan does now not resolve the deficit issue within the planned 10 years.

9. SEND Transport

9.1 The cost of transport has seen a significant increase over the past few years and the transport team undertook a revised procurement review in 2020 to ensure we remain cost effective and have sufficient providers to meet the need of those families who are eligible for school transport. As a consequence of the procurement exercise, we have put in place a procurement framework which allows for increased flexibility when arranging transport. Overall, this has resulted in significant savings and has increased the number of providers.

9.2 SEND transport is overseen by the School Admissions and Transport team within the Schools Services department. The team are responsible for procuring the transport from various providers and ensuring the smooth operation on a day-to-day basis.

9.3 The team provide a coordinated and cohesive approach, working closely with providers, parents and schools, ensuring that each pupil's needs are met. Currently 1550 pupils are eligible for SEND transport, with 1323 transported each day by the council's providers.

9.4 Since March 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic started, we have continued to provide SEND transport, working in partnership with schools, parents/carers and providers to ensure a safe environment for all those travelling, which has included reducing numbers on vehicles, transporting pupils within their bubbles, keeping vehicles ventilated with robust hygiene regimes; the use of face coverings where appropriate and hand sanitiser, as well as social distancing when queuing and careful planning on the order in which pupils are boarded onto the minibuses and taxis.

9.5 This process has worked well during lockdown periods with schools praising the manner in which the transport has been organised and undertaken.

9.6 Officers are exploring ways in which to improve the service for pupils and parents including simplifying the process by removing the need for parents to re-apply annually.

Appendices

None

Background papers
None