

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

2 MARCH 2023

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 April 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)
- Children's Provider Services (including Adoption, Fostering, Supported Accommodation and Residential Care)

- Children's Social Care and Safeguarding Services including Safeguarding Board
- Early Help (including Youth Offending Team (YOT) and Youth Services)
- External Inspections
- Inclusion
- SEND including Mental Health
- 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 Council Services for children and young people have continued to work with our children and families providing support and assistance. The council has 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 their continued commitment to driving improvement following the Ofsted inspection in July 2019. Despite the pressure of the pandemic, I am pleased and proud of the progress that has been made.

2.3 Throughout 2022, Children's Services has continued to be subject to statutory intervention, with an independently chaired Improvement Board in place, which has continued to provide oversight of the improvement plan. The Council has continued 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.

2.4 I am a member of the Children's Improvement Board, set up to oversee, challenge and support the implementation of the Improvement Plan developed in response to the Ofsted Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services in July 2019, and updated annually to respond to the findings of subsequent Monitoring Visits by Ofsted inspectors. The Board is independently chaired, and includes statutory partners, the LGA and our DFE adviser. As a member I have opportunity to review progress on the plan and contribute to the Board discussions about how to support ongoing improvements to the service.

2.5 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.

- 2.6 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.
- 2.7 Over the coming year we will continue to make sustainable improvements to improve the services we provide for Medway's children.
- 2.8 I am fully briefed on the current recruitment challenges in the social care workforce, which are faced by all local authorities nationally, and have supported actions taken to address this on a local level in order to minimise the impact on practice.
- 2.9 Along with the Leader and Chief Executive, I meet monthly with the DCS, the Children's Services Assistant Director (AD), Head of Improvement and our DFE adviser to review progress against the Improvement Plan, scrutinise quality of practice and identify challenges and ways to overcome these. We receive a report on an aspect of practice at each meeting and have the opportunity to review effectiveness, understand the impact of our interventions and support plans for improvement.
- 2.10 As chair of the Children's Oversight Board I ensure oversight of the effectiveness of children's social care and education, and provide strong strategic leadership, support and challenge to the service. The Board is attended by DCS, the Portfolio Holder for Education and Schools, Assistant Director's for Education and Children's Services, and all Heads of Service, and reviews performance data on a monthly basis. This provides an opportunity for me to challenge, question and better understand compliance with statutory requirements across all service areas and the impact this has on children in receipt of our services. Where there are identified shortfalls, I can question this with the operational managers and ensure they have plans in place to address this.
- 2.11 I have actively supported the work of Child Friendly Medway which sets out a vision for making Medway a better place for children to live, learn, and contribute to our community. This has included attending a number of Town Hall events aimed at seeking views of children and young people about the services they receive.
- 2.12 I regularly visit our services in the community, including schools, Parklands (our respite home for disabled children), Cookham Wood, Mid Kent College,

to meet with children, young people and families and speak to service providers about their role and what could improve their services.

- 2.13 I am pleased to be able to celebrate the achievements of our children and young people in Medway and this year I have judged our Youth Awards in July, and Time to Shine event for children in care and care leavers in September.

3. Children's Partnership Commissioning

- 3.1. Medway have continued to see increasing challenges in meeting the placement needs of Medway's children. We have a large number of children placed in Medway by other local authorities which draws heavily on the availability of placements in the area. This presents considerable challenges to our sufficiency locally, leading to Medway often having to place children at a distance due to a shortfall in resources. These shortfalls in sufficiency, combined with an increase in children with more complex needs, have placed considerable pressure on Children's Services and Commissioning Services since the pandemic.

- 3.2. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has seen an increase in young people with more complex needs that require bespoke, specialist, tailored support. The Council must have the right offer in place to manage this demand with earlier intervention, wrap support around children to keep them with their families or in family-based settings (like foster care) to prevent further escalating costs. We have seen a number of carers leaving the sector following the pandemic. In addition, we have seen an increase in other local authorities placing children in independent foster placements and residential placements in Medway. There is consequently a scarcity of providers with the capability to manage the needs of these young people at a local, regional and national level.

- 3.3. I have worked closely with the Leader to oversee the work of the Children's Services AD and head of Commissioning to address the challenges currently posed by a shortage of available placements for children in our care. This has included commissioning emergency placement beds, respite foster care placements, and supported accommodation. I have overseen the ending of the contract for residential provision at Eden House which was not meeting contractual requirements. The leader and I have been actively involved in overseeing plans for how we will take forward plans for Eden House in the future so it can offer a facility for our children in accordance with our vision to keep children close to their families within Medway boundaries.

4. Children's Provider Services (including Adoption, Fostering, Supported Accommodation and Residential Care)

- 4.1. I have supported the appointment of a Head of Provider Services post as part of the children's management team following the review of the structure of the service in 2021. This post holder is responsible for our in-house fostering

service, Parklands, our residential respite home, and our Youth Service, as well as the new multi-disciplinary service which now provides our workforce with seamless access to timely and effective wrap around support for families, aiming to reduce the risk of harm to children; particularly for those on the edge of care. Provision includes the Family Partnership, Adolescent support, Family Group Conferencing, and a newly invested Specialist Assessment Team.

- 4.2. I have been very pleased that the DFE has supported Children's Services this year with allocation of funding to set up a multi-disciplinary team based within this service, to work with children and families where neglect and domestic abuse are a risk factor. Unfortunately, this funding was only agreed to the end of March 2023, but there has been opportunity to target wrap around intervention with a number of families, and to engage all partners in learning and skill development, culminating in a conference on Neglect to be held in March 2023.
- 4.3. Our in-house fostering service was reviewed during 2021 and the Council agreed a package of increased fees to our foster carers and realignment of the service in order to provide additional support and training for our carers, to help them to look after our more vulnerable children. Posts were also created to oversee private fostering arrangements and recruitment of supported lodgings for young people over 16 years.
- 4.4. Recruitment and retention of foster carers is currently very challenging nationally and Medway's picture mirrors the national situation, with the national cost of living crisis eroding the improvement in fees. Prior to 2022, Medway was placing around 62% of children with in-house carers, but this has fallen to around 50% for the last calendar year, placing additional pressure on the placement budgets and leading to budget pressures for the Service. Recruitment of carers with the right skills and commitment to fostering remains the biggest challenge for the fostering service, and I will support them to continue to prioritise recruitment activity and support and training for our existing carers to encourage them to continue working with Medway.
- 4.5. I am pleased to provide an overview of the progress of Medway's regional adoption agency (RAA), the Adoption Partnership, South East, which is a collaboration comprising Medway, the London Borough of Bexley and Kent County Council. The RAA launched on 1 November 2020 and delivers adoption services on behalf of the three local authorities. The RAA is now becoming embedded. Partnerships are working very well, with strong governance and quarterly board meetings which are attended and chaired by each of the Local Authorities' Directors of Children's Services.
- 4.6. Extensive work has taken place over the last year to ensure consistent and effective scrutiny of adoption practice, and the impact this has for Medway's children. So far, since April 2022, Medway have had 26 children's adoption plans agreed, considerably better than in 2021-22, when adoption performance was impacted nationally by the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to delays in court proceedings. Although adoption timeliness in Medway is not

yet back to pre-pandemic levels, court proceedings are now progressing, and more children are moving through the adoption process in a timelier way.

- 4.7. It is positive that the RAA has recently been successful in submitting two expressions of interest for DfE funding streams to support early permanence and matching of children across the region.
- 4.8. I am pleased to have received assurance that the RAA adoption support service is providing good support to children and families in Medway, as identified by the recent independent review of the RAA adoption support service in August 2022. The independent review led by the National RAA Leadership Group concluded that the service is strong and well led, with committed and skilled staff. A development plan, setting out key priorities following the review is now in placement and will be reviewed through the RAA governance board.

5. Children's Social Care and Safeguarding Services including Safeguarding Partnership

Children's Social Work and 0-25

- 5.1 The Children's Social Work service, which focuses on support and intervention for children in need now includes the adolescent teams, 8 Children's Social Work teams and the 0-25 disabled children's service. The service has seen an increase in need, with more children in need referred into the service, and more children in need of protection requiring a child protection plan. This has placed significant pressure on the social work teams at a time when staffing challenges were also being experienced. I have ensured oversight of the increasing demands and have sight of the numbers of children in need and subject to a plan on a regular basis, which assures I am in touch with the pressures on the service.
- 5.2. The Children's Social Work service has experienced significant staff turnover and unfilled vacancies over the last year, particularly over the June to November period. This is as a consequence of a national shortfall of qualified social workers to take up posts. This remains a significant risk in terms of improved quality of practice, and I have supported a request to Council to agree funding for additional peripatetic workers and project teams to provide essential capacity to ensure all our children have an allocated social worker.
- 5.3 In recognition of the particular vulnerabilities of our adolescents, many of whom are subject to exploitation or are regularly missing, and the pressure this creates on these teams, I supported a request for an additional project team and management capacity.
- 5.4 The 0-25 children's disability service was aligned to the Children's Social Work teams in 2022 following its transfer to Children's Services from the Education directorate in 2021. Extensive work has taken place to develop strengthened oversight of care planning and decision making. this has included increased social work and manager capacity to support social

workers to hold fewer childcare cases, and to enable managers increased oversight and scrutiny. Actions have been taken to create some specialist adult social work posts within the service to support more focused transition planning for young people. The Ofsted Monitoring Visit confirmed that there are still improvements to be made to our services to all disabled children in Medway. This work is continuing and the 0-25 service has also benefited from the additional staffing capacity from the peripatetic team in covering staffing vacancies.

Medway Safeguarding Children's Partnership

- 5.5. Medway Council, Kent Police and NHS Kent and Medway 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.
- 5.6. Safeguarding cannot be undertaken in isolation, and it is essential that all parties are working together with the Council children's services. During the year, the MSCP has set up an Accountable Officers Meeting to ensure the statutory partners remain well informed on the issues facing the partnership and can address strategic issues in relation to staffing resources and overall direction. This is a positive development and is evidence of a strong commitment to safeguarding children at the highest levels across the partnership.
- 5.7. The MSCP supports learning from practice and completed two Rapid Reviews during 2021-22. The National Panel were in agreement that the reports were comprehensive, well-structured and well written and identified all relevant learning, which was shared across the partnership.
- 5.8. Work with our most vulnerable adolescents is a priority for the service and is incorporated into our Improvement Plan. During 2021-22, the MSCP worked with partners to develop and launch the Medway Contextual Safeguarding Strategy 2021-23 aimed at improving the multiagency response to contextual safeguarding and exploitation in Medway. The MSCP has a multi-agency network of exploitation champions who support the development of a safe, responsive and effective service for children and young people who experience or are at risk of exploitation within their agency and make links

with multi-agency partners. The exploitation champions support the implementation of the Contextual Safeguarding strategy, enhance professionals and public awareness of child exploitation in Medway; implement good practice on the issue of exploitation in Medway agencies and support the professional development of others in relation to exploitation.

- 5.9. Neglect is also a key priority in our improvement plan and for the Medway Safeguarding Children Partnership (MSCP) for 2022-23 because we know that both nationally and locally, neglect is a key risk factor for children. In March 2022, the MSCP hosted a Neglect Conference for professionals which was attended by over 100 professionals and included key updates from partner agencies, the voice of the child, learning lessons from reviews and the Graded Care Profile (GCP2). In the last year, the MSCP has trained 307 professionals across the partnership to use the Graded Care Profile (GCP2), an assessment tool for neglect. This includes 140 staff trained within Medway Council Children's Services and 107 professionals trained from partner agencies by the MSCP. There will be a further conference in March 2023 to continue disseminating learning on working with neglect, particularly drawing on the experiences of our multi-Disciplinary team.
- 5.10. I take part in regular safeguarding visits to children and families in receipt of our services. This is a planned programme whereby together with the DCS and AD, we meet front line practitioners and then accompany them on visits to a child or family. This provides a line of sight into practice and opportunity to speak directly to children and families to hear their experiences.
- 5.11. I regularly meet with practitioners, through workplace visits or attendance at our Staff Reference Group. I also attend some staff conferences, which have been held three times in the last year. I was pleased to see the work undertaken on developing a shared Vision and standards for the service which staff across all services contributed to. I have also supported actions in response to staff suggestions, including the significant Council investment in reviewing and changing the forms for recording on Mosaic to ensure they support improved practice and are in line with Signs of Safety, our practice model.
- 5.12. I work with other members and officers to scrutinise the effectiveness, value for money of resources and check that expenditure remains within budget. This is challenging within current resource availability and demands on the service, but I am confident that the service has rigorous oversight and is taking all necessary steps to ensure spending is proportionate and appropriate.

6. Early Help (including Youth Offending Team (YOT) and Youth Services)

Early Help

- 6.1. I have supported the delivery of the Early Help Strategy which was launched in July 2021. The board are promoting a shared vision, joint priorities, and services, ensuring the best possible outcomes for children. Most significantly this year, a partners' workflow has been created onto MOSAIC enabling a shared recording system, and an early help data analyst has been appointed to lead the reporting and analysis of data. In November members of the board led the MSCP leadership event which focussed on early help. This will support the engagement of all partners in delivery of early help services and ensure that our in-house service, Family Solutions, is able to target its intervention on supporting children and families who have more complex needs.
- 6.2. I have supported the service to review and revise the structure and line management of service areas since my last report. I am pleased that the assessment service is now aligned with family solutions, SPA and MASH, to enable improved communication and allocation of referrals in a timely way to the right service.
- 6.3. Family Solutions' relationship with children's statutory services continues to strengthen and this has been supported by the realignment of services and family solutions and joining up recording onto one shared database (MOSAIC). I am confident that Family Solutions continues to build on relationships with partners in Education, Health and across Medway.

Youth Services

- 6.4. In Medway, youth work is delivered as a preventative and early intervention service for young people. As such, it plays an integral part in delivering improved outcomes for children and young people. To reduce the demand for statutory interventions in their families' lives, Youth Services has close working relationships with colleagues in a range of other services including Social Care, Youth Offending, Family Solutions and with partners like schools, the hospital and police.
- 6.5. Every week hundreds of youth work, sports, arts, creative and fun opportunities are provided to children and young people living in Medway. Whether this be out in the community or centre based. All supporting young people to learn new skills and socialise in safe, positive environments. Alongside this where possible targeted 1-2-1 work with young people supports those with most need.
- 6.6. The Youth Service has been successful at receiving external grant funding and income. The service continues to pursue external funding to work towards minimising the financial cost of the service to the council. A number of special

projects within the service have been externally funded to deliver innovative targeted programmes. The external funding provides additional capacity for specific purposes rather than reducing the cost of the youth service.

- 6.7. The benefits of early intervention and prevention are well known and evidenced by research. For every child prevented from escalating in need to statutory services, the family not only benefit but significant costs of step up are avoided, for example Child in need, child protection or child in care intervention.
- 6.8. I play an active role in supporting the youth service, undertaking safeguarding visits and supporting the youth awards event.

Youth Offending Team

- 6.9. Since the pandemic there has been a significant increase in the work of the Youth Court. In 2021-22 there were 50 children referred to the Youth Offending Team by the Youth Court and in 2022-23 that number increased to 70 with a total of 186 children being referred by both the Youth Court and the Police. In May 2022, the national Youth Justice Board identified the potential impact of coming out of the pandemic, which could see an increase in the numbers of children in custody double by September 2024.
- 6.10. In Medway, to date, there are currently no children sentenced to a custodial sentence. However, seven children have been remanded by the youth court this year, and four of these continue to be remanded awaiting their sentence in crown court.
- 6.11. Caseloads in the Youth Offending Team have increased by 25% post pandemic which is reflective of the local police and courts increased activity.
- 6.12. The Youth Offending Team continues in its aspiration to develop best practice in working with children in the Youth Justice System. The 2022-2024 local Youth Justice Plan represents a real commitment to developing Child First approaches to working with children in the Youth Justice System. Child First principles are now the national guiding principles for the Youth Justice sector. Medway's Youth Offending Team has been bold and innovative in seeking to implement these principles, and it is their aspiration that the majority of children who work with the Youth Offending Team in 2023 will receive a formal accreditation for the work that they have undertaken. This approach is robustly seeking to develop the positive contribution that children can make to the community and to develop their employability and participation in education and training.
- 6.13. In November 2022 the Ministry of Justice launched the Turnaround program. This is a national prevention initiative seeking to engage children on the cusp of offending with the aim of diverting them from the Youth Justice System. Medway has received funding to work with 73 children up until March 2025. The Youth Offending Team are currently in the process of recruiting a Youth Offending Team Officer to be able to deliver this project.

7. Support to children in our care and care leavers and Corporate Parenting

Support to children in our care and care leavers

- 7.1. I work closely with our children in care and care leavers service, through my role as Chair of the Corporate Parenting Board. I am pleased to report that despite a national 2% rise in children in coming into care in 2022 (Gov.UK children looked after in England reporting year 2022) our children in care cohort has remained stable (with an average of 450 children in care throughout the year). I see through scrutiny of the monthly dashboard that our children and young people have regular contact with their social workers, and they participate in their reviews, meeting their Independent Reviewing Officers between reviews. I have continued to champion stability and permanent homes for our children, and I am pleased that we have made significant strides in this respect, with 70% of our children now having permanence in a long-term foster placement, compared to 39% in 2021/2022. This has been achieved in the context of wider market challenges regarding a shortfall in sufficient homes for children in care. I am kept regularly updated about placement challenges, including the need to place some of our children in unregulated or unregistered provision when no other suitable placement is available. Whilst this is not a solution, I am confident that there is a robust process in place for overseeing these children and mitigating the additional risks caused by the need to make these placements.
- 7.2. I know through meeting with the head, that our Virtual School provides support and learning opportunities to schools within Medway and further afield, and has this year piloted a new electronic personal education plan.
- 7.3. I am aware that the service has recently finalised a participation strategy and through the use of Mind of My Own, and Medway Children and Young People Council (MCYPC), is engaging with and capturing the voices of our children and young people.
- 7.4. The service has seen a steady increase in the numbers of young people in our leaving care service, with currently 181 young people receiving support. I am pleased that I have been able to support a significant investment to right size the service, which will mean we can continue to offer a responsive service to our care experienced young people, as well as ensuring we have the right environment and conditions for staff to focus on building relationships and supporting young people. I have supported the appointment of an Aspirations officer into the Leaving Care service and am pleased that this additional capacity has resulted in an improvement in the percentage of our young people who are in Education Training and Employment, now 57% of which is an increase from 37% in April 2021. I have visited the Elaine Centre which is a wonderful resource offering a range of regular of events and activities and am pleased to report that we now have regular parenting

groups, independent living skills training, and housing advice and support, alongside drop in facilities.

Corporate Parenting

- 7.5. Corporate parenting is the collective responsibility of the council to prioritise the needs of children in our care and seek for them the same outcomes any good parent would want for their own children. I am proud to chair our Corporate Parenting Board and work with other councillors and officers to deliver against our strategy and improve outcomes for our children in care and care leavers.
- 7.6. The Corporate Parenting Board (CPB) meets bi-monthly with two sub-groups reporting into the Board. Membership crosses all key areas, including representative from the Council's children in care council (Medway Children and Young People's Council (MCYPC), Council officers, elected members, strategic leads for key partner agencies, as well as representative foster carers and adopters. The two sub-groups are Health of Our Children in Care, and the Care Leavers Corporate Parenting Delivery Group. The chairs of the sub-groups are core members of the Board.
- 7.7. Since the last Ofsted inspection in 2019, the Corporate Parenting Board has been re-designed to provide the necessary leadership that drives an ambitious and multi-agency approach to achieving its objectives. We now have regular agenda items that support the Board to oversee satisfactory completion of actions and work in a way that ensures the voice of children and young people is influential in decision making.
- 7.8. Over the last year, concerted work has taken place to strengthen the corporate parenting function across the Council, supported by external consultants and the LGA. This has included work to improve the focus of the Board, so it is better able to challenge and hold the service to account for delivering the improvements needed in meeting the needs of children in our care and care leavers.
- 7.9. Training provided by the LGA was very constructive for Board members and has helped us all to focus on what it means to be a good corporate parent and how to ask the right questions in order to get a true sense of what life is like for the children and young people in our care and our care leavers.

- 7.10. The external consultant worked with me and the Children's Services AD to bring a more structured approach to the CPB function. This has led to the development of a thematic work plan. CPB sessions now focus on key practice areas which are important to children and young people, and which help members to scrutinise delivery against plans. As part of the board, we have had active participation from children in care/care leavers representatives through MCYPC, including corporate challenge cards, on the following themes:
- Feeling safe
 - Feeling listened to and cared for
 - Health and support
 - Housing and accommodation
 - Participation
- 7.11. Champion roles have been developed for elected members covering areas such as health, education, and our care leavers. This plays to members' strengths and areas of expertise, brings greater scope for effective challenge and encourages an increased focus on the issues which are critical to children and young people.
- 7.12. The interface between the CPB and the Medway Children and Young People's Council (MCYPC) has been strengthened. A representative of MCYPC attends CPB meetings and acts as a conduit for sharing the views of children and young people, supported to participate by a member of the Young Lives Foundation (YLF). Young people have developed challenge cards as a way of sharing their views and experiences of being in care and to let senior managers and corporate parents know how they would like to see them improve support and services.
- 7.13. The CPB receives a summary of performance data at each meeting in addition to the performance reports of each sub-group. A new programme of performance workshops delivered by the AD, Children's Services, has supported members of the Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee, many of whom sit on the CPB, in how to interpret and understand the data and what to consider when seeking to provide scrutiny and challenge.
- 7.14. As Lead Member I actively support the Time to Shine Awards which is a ceremony to celebrate achievements of our children in care and care leavers. I have also been able to mobilise Council resources, engaging the support of other elected members, to support the events that are run for children in care and care experienced young people, including events such as Time to Shine, care leavers Week and the care leavers Christmas dinner.
- 7.15. The Corporate Parenting Board has also worked with the service to agree and implement a pledge 'My Things Matter' to ensure that children and young people in our care have their belongings treated with dignity, care and respect and bags are provided for every child in our care for them to use when they change placements. This has wholeheartedly been endorsed by our Corporate Parenting Board.

7.16. As Chair of the Board, I have also worked to improve our services for our care leavers and through the work of the Board we have achieved the following:

- Review and relaunch of our care leavers offer
- Implementation of a rent guarantee scheme for care leavers
- Housing needs analysis undertaken and review of sufficiency of appropriate supported accommodation for care leavers

8. External Inspections

8.1 Throughout the year the Service has continued to work 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.

8.2 Ofsted carried out their fifth Monitoring Visit in September 2022, 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.

8.3 The inspectors noted the following improvements:

- Social workers in the 0-25 service are committed to improving disabled children's lives.
- Senior Leaders continue to focus purposefully on the improvement journey.
- Robust audit and moderation processes are in place.
- Children are promptly seen when a referral is accepted and transferred into the 0-25 service.
- The Wednesday Squad is a resource highly valued by young people.
- Since the ILACS in 2019, senior leaders have identified weaknesses in the 0-25 services and have created a detailed improvement plan specifically for the service.

8.4 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.

8.5 In June 2022, the Council's short breaks home for children with disabilities was rated good by Ofsted following a two-day inspection of the service. During its visit, Ofsted found that all children who visit the centre receive individualised care and positive experiences. I am incredibly proud that Ofsted has recognised the hard work staff have made at Parklands since the last inspection in 2021. Parklands is a fantastic centre which provides short breaks for young people where they can learn new things and take part in fun activities.

9 Inclusion

9.1. 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

Permanent Exclusion and Suspension Summary

9.2. Medway continues to permanently exclude less learners than national. The trend of reduction in issuing permanent exclusions continued from 2016 to the end of the academic year 2021. This included the periods of national lockdown when the majority of learners were not required to be in school for the full year. Medway completed the year below the national rate for exclusion for a third year running. 94 schools out of 104 did not issue any permanent exclusions.

9.3. Most of the permanent exclusions were from secondary schools with the reasons similar to national. Physical and verbal aggression were the main reasons for exclusion; however, the low number of permanent exclusions distort national comparisons.

9.4. The permanent exclusion of learners with SEND and those in receipt of FSM was lower than national. The cohorts with the most exclusions are Asian, SEND Support, learners with a mixed ethnicity and males.

Suspensions

9.5. The trend of reduction in issuing suspensions from 2016 halted during the pandemic. Once schools re-opened, Medway suspended learners at a greater rate than national. Suspensions caused by persistent disruptive behaviour were the most frequent, however incidences were proportionately less than national. Physical and verbal aggression occurred proportionately more than national. Unlike permanent exclusions, suspensions are issued in excess of the national rate in all school types, primary, secondary, and special school; 49 out of 104 schools issued suspensions.

- 9.6. The suspension of learners by age and year group in Medway tends to follow the national profile each year. During the period 2020-2021, there is a difference in performance between Medway's age suspension profile in primary and secondary. Primary is below the national profile in KS1 but above in KS2, whilst in secondary, Medway is above the national rate for all year groups. This increase with older learners continued into KS5, with more 18-year-old suspensions being issued in Medway compared to the national.
- 9.7. Learners who are suspended the most are those identified as SEND Support and in receipt of an FSM. A high proportion of suspensions are for learners with an EHCP, however, Medway's rate is proportionately lower than the national rate.
- 9.8. As a strong partnership across all relevant partners and agencies in Medway, we are ambitious for all our children and young people. We are committed to providing the best quality education and support for children and families and to securing good outcomes and effective transition to adulthood. High quality inclusive education is at the heart of improving long term sustainable outcomes for our children and young people and their families. All children and young people thrive when they are integrated into their local communities and mainstream schools. We have been explicit in our intention to maintain this priority.
- 9.9. We set clear goals and actions to support the inclusion agenda in Medway, including:
- developing a core offer of training and support to embed whole school approaches to support inclusion, linking to and complementing the broader system of targeted and specialist support, to build upon skills and expertise within individual schools. We are currently taking this forward through a project to embed trauma informed practice across Medway schools and education and children's services partnership.
 - undertaking a thorough and robust review of our Alternative Provision (AP) offer, with a view to increase the capacity of AP to support pre-emptive and reintegration activity, including revolving door and outreach.
 - Revising the funding arrangements around SEND learners so that more resource is provided to mainstream schools to support inclusion.
 - Promoting the importance of inclusion and partnership working through events such as our Inclusive Education Conference, Inclusive Education oversight group and task and finish groups.

Attendance

- 9.10. 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 continues to provide a traded service to the majority of schools in Medway.

- 9.11. The proportion of absence and persistent absence from Medway schools is greater than national. After 8th March 2021, when schools were mandated to open, Medway continued to experience high volumes of Covid cases, impacting negatively upon school absence. By the end of the academic year, 2020-2021, the gap to national was the widest recorded having grown from being in line with national in 2019, pre-pandemic.
- 9.12. EHCP learners attend school better than their national peers but are significantly below national to be persistently absent.
- 9.13. Learners in receipt of FSM are the second largest group of who are absent from school, and their absence is correspondingly persistent.
- 9.14. The academic performance of these poor attending groups corresponds with their general underperformance.
- 9.15. In contrast, Black learners are the least absent from school and generally outperform Medway, national and their national peers.
- 9.16. Work has started with a dedicated DfE attendance Advisor supporting on an attendance action plan and recently Medway joining with Kent in a DfE Attendance Alliance programme to look at disseminating good practice across the region.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

- 9.17. 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 a poor 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.
- 9.18. 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.

10. Support to Children and Young People with SEND

- 10.1. I have overseen the development of a revised SEND Strategy for the 2022-2025 period which sets out the priorities for Children and Young People with SEND over the next three years. Built in coproduction with the views of parents and young people, it focuses on the key aim of improving the opportunities for young people with SEND to live fulfilled lives and achieve independence in or near Medway, their community.
- 10.2. Alongside, the Chief Nurse of the NHS Integrated Care Board, I chair the SEND Improvement Board. Despite being released from DfE formal monitoring, in October 2021, we are now working with our partners to prepare for the Government's new Local Area SEND Inspection Framework. We received guidance in November last year and are currently conducting a self-evaluation of all SEND services to highlight priority areas for action.
- 10.3. Furthermore, I have received assurance that our Safety Valve (SV) intervention programme, in partnership with the DfE, to develop the system supporting children with SEND such that the High Needs Block (HNB) can operate within an in-year positive balance is progressing. You will be aware that the deficit on the High Needs Budget (HNB) for 2021/22 was £20.5m.
- 10.4. I, alongside the Leader as Portfolio Holder for Finance, over saw the development of a robust plan. I am pleased, that the Secretary of State has approved the plan this year, which aims to remove the deficit by March 2026. To support the delivery of this plan, the Council has secured additional revenue funding of £14,282,110, profiled over the duration of the plan and capital funding of £7,188,479, received in February 2023.
- 10.5. The plan focuses on five overarching priorities, which together address changes to the SEND system in Medway: -
1. Appropriately managing the demand for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), ensuring EHCP requests are timely and appropriate and supported by education and health professionals, such that the annual rate of growth in EHCPs decline from 7.6% in 2022 to 3.8% in 2026 (Jan figures), this is a growth from 2,697 to 3,254 for the respective period. This includes the assumption that the population growth for 0-25 yrs. in Medway will be 1% between 2022 and 2026, with a 2.66% reduction in pupils under 10 working through the system. (ONS data)
 2. Increasing the proportion of children and young people with SEND who receive high quality education and achieve their potential in mainstream

schools, such that the proportion of children and young people with an EHCP attending mainstream (including Resourced Provisions) increases, from 31.3% to 41.8% over the 4 years. An increase of 243 children into mainstream and 177 into resourced provision.

3. Ensuring the use of appropriate and cost-effective provision, including a robust commissioning function to secure improvements in terms of quality and financial efficiencies for placements, such that the rate of increases for placement costs for independent provision does not exceed 7% year on year.
4. Sufficiency of Provision, such that the proportion of CYP with EHCPs catered for in independent schools reduces from 12% to 3.1% by 25/26
5. Sustainability of Governance, management, and delivery.

High Needs Places

- 10.6. Extensions to the buildings at Abbey Court School and Bradfield's Academy have been completed, giving an increased capacity of 156 special school places in Medway.
- 10.7. We have opened a new ASD Resourced Provision at Strood Academy. We are in discussions with three further Medway Secondary Schools and two Grammar Schools to develop ASD, MLD and SEMH Resourced Provisions.
- 10.8. We have opened 2 new satellite provisions at Bligh Primary School and Featherby Primary School for pupils at Danecourt School. This has resulted in 48 new places.
- 10.9. The Education and SEND teams now include two Commissioning Officers who are working with Independent Special Schools to ensure that there are 'value for money' contractual agreements in place.
- 10.10. Continued training for staff of health providers has taken place on the requirements for writing EHCP advice and reports. This has improved the quality of advice received for EHCPs. The role of the EHCP Health Co-Ordinator in the Integrated Care Board has assisted in securing timely and good quality information for Education, Health and Care Assessments.
- 10.11. An increase in the number of Supported Internship Providers in Medway offering over 45 Supported Internship places to young people with EHCPs. This provision has proved very successful for young people with special educational needs being offered employment after the internship. We have also developed a "Preparation for Employment" course with a supported internship provider to assist young people to gain the skills necessary to take a supported internship.

- 10.12. 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. Medway Parent Carers Forum now also take part in the Quality Audit of Education, Health and Care Plans.
- 10.13. The Young Person Disability Group has been re-established after covid Lockdown and they are starting to actively influence commissioning and service development decisions.
- 10.14. Following feedback from schools the Ordinarily Available Provision Document was revised and is published on The Local Offer website. This document sets out the support that should be available to children and young people who have special educational needs in mainstream provisions in Medway. An Ordinarily Available Provision Guide for Parents has been co-produced with parents.
- 10.15. In order to assist Medway mainstream schools to meet the special educational needs of more children who have an EHCP, we have reviewed the funding and resources available to them. This has led to the introduction of: _
1. A Banded Funding Matrix – this will ensure that there is fair and transparent “Top-Up” funding available to all schools in Medway based on the child’s level of need. The funding will follow the child. This will be introduced from April 2023.
 2. Change the SEN Notional Budget Policy - The current SEN Notional Budget Policy does not always recognise schools who support over the national level of children who have EHCP’s. the policy has been changed so that where a school has over the national average number of children with an EHCP, Medway Council will pay the Element 2 funding for all children with an EHCP over that number.
 3. Locality Resources – providing funding to local system leaders, that can be deployed collectively to rapidly address short term and emerging issues, either in a school or across a group of schools. The resource is intended to prevent escalation of needs and address local challenges preventing inclusion.

11. SEND Transport

- 11.1. 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. Therefore, the revised procurement framework allows for increased flexibility when arranging transport. During 2023 the full SEND transport contract suite will be retendered, and the framework refreshed for implementation from September 2023.
- 11.2. 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.

- 11.3. The team provide a coordinated and cohesive approach, working closely with providers, parents, and schools, ensuring that each pupil's needs are met. Currently 1703 pupils are eligible for SEND transport, with 1464 transported each day by the council's providers.
- 11.4. Officers continually listen to parents and carers and explore ways in which to improve the service. This year simplifying the process by removing the need for parents to re-apply annually unless there is a change to circumstances.
- 11.5. Officers are reviewing fuel allowance, where practical and possible and will implement a travel training programme with the outcome providing students with travel passes instead of shared transport, which will promote and support independence and life skills. These will be consulted upon during the spring 2023, with the aim to implement from September 2023.

Appendices

None

Background papers

None