

Inspection of Medway local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 17 to 28 July 2023

Lead inspector: Amanda Maxwell, His Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Services for children and families in Medway have substantially improved since the inspection in 2019, when they were judged to be inadequate. Corporate and political leaders have addressed the systemic weaknesses and there is now a strong, determined and cohesive leadership team. Leaders have achieved significant progress, with a well-managed 'front door' and early help service, which ensures appropriate initial and timely responses to children's needs. There have also been improvements for children in care and care leavers, who now receive good care and support.

Variability remains in the quality and impact of social work practice, specifically in the longer-term support provided to adolescents, those at risk of exploitation, and disabled children and their families. Leaders know this and are continually striving to establish and deliver greater consistency in practice and to achieve improved workforce stability.

What needs to improve?

- The quality and effectiveness of assessments, plans, interventions and responses for children who are at risk of exploitation and/or risk outside of the home.
- The quality and variety of direct work and life-story work available to children.
- The quality and consistency of assessments and planning to support disabled children.
- The quality and consistency of management oversight.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: requires improvement to be good

1. There are a number of strong areas of practice for children who need help and protection, as well as a number of weaker areas. A significant number of children in the adolescent service receive a poorer quality service; this is compounded by weaker management oversight and supervision in this area. The quality of practice for disabled children, although improving, remains inconsistent for some children.
2. Early help services have significantly improved since the previous inspection in 2019. Most families receive the right support at the earliest opportunity and their situations improve. Meaningful and impactful work with children and families explores children's experiences. Children and families benefit from an array of interventions. These include a range of services and parenting programmes which provide support to victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse and enable families to reduce incidents. These have a positive impact on children's lives. Detailed and collaborative assessments inform interventions, which provide parents and carers with insight into the impact of their behaviours. This, in turn, supports them to address behaviours and improve their children's experiences. Children and families participate in developing plans which promote engagement and effective safety planning. Thorough management oversight ensures that, when concerns increase for children, appropriate action is taken to step up to statutory services.
3. The majority of children referred to the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), single point of access (SPA) or emergency duty team receive a timely and appropriate response. Managers and social workers demonstrate a clear understanding of risk. Thresholds are applied appropriately, with regular and effective management oversight. Decisions are informed by partnership working, children's voice and historical events. There is a clear understanding of the need to gain parental consent, and this is sought at every possible opportunity, alongside a detailed rationale when this is overridden.
4. The response to referrals of significant concern is appropriate, mostly timely and child-focused. Strategy discussions include key partners. Actions are clearly stated and include contingency planning. Children are seen swiftly to gain their

voices and views. Child protection enquiries are thorough, with necessary action taken to address risk.

5. Social workers have a clear understanding of children's experiences and how risks and concerns impact on their development. The majority of assessments are detailed, with clear evaluation of strengths and risks leading to appropriate recommendations for next steps. Children benefit from improved partnership arrangements, with accountability shared appropriately. Plans are regularly reviewed to measure progress, with escalation when timely improvement to children's lives is not made.
6. Sixteen- and 17-year-old children who are at risk of homelessness receive an inconsistent response. For some, there is an initial delay in assessing need. However, once a joint assessment with housing is undertaken, clear plans are formulated. Children are offered advocacy support; this helps them to understand their rights and entitlements.
7. There is an effective response to children who go missing, with all offered opportunities to explore the reasons, as well as the push and pull factors for their missing episode. While this informs future safety planning, the overall response to those at risk of exploitation and risk outside the home is variable. Social workers do not consistently use the tools available to assist, assess or identify risk, which in turn weakens safety planning. Interventions do not routinely reduce or manage risk, meaning that some children do not have improved experiences.
8. The quality of practice in the newly configured children and young people's disabilities service is inconsistent. Social workers have varying levels of competence and confidence in supporting and protecting children. Senior leaders are aware of this and have recently made changes to service structure and provision, to improve practice. As yet, these changes are not embedded and so not all children are currently benefiting.
9. Arrangements to manage allegations against professionals are robust and thorough. They are delivered by a well-resourced and skilled service.
10. An increasing number of children in Medway are electively home educated. There are effective processes to monitor the arrangements for these children and for those who are missing from education.
11. Children living in private fostering arrangements benefit from comprehensive assessments and support from social workers.
12. Practice in relation to the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline has significantly improved since the previous inspection. Senior managers have clear oversight of children's circumstances and the progress being made with their plans. A small minority of children have entered care via emergency

action, rather than in a planned way at the earliest opportunity. There is more to do to ensure that the quality and accessibility of letters before proceedings improve to ensure that families fully understand what the concerns are and what is needed to improve children's circumstances.

13. Children are seen regularly by social workers. Visits are purposeful and children have meaningful conversations, which helps others to understand their lived experiences and worries. The quality of direct work with children is variable. In stronger practice, children are afforded opportunities to quickly form relationships of trust with social workers, which enables them to share their lived experiences.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

14. The majority of children in care live in stable homes with carers who are nurturing, supportive and caring. Children's needs are well met and they make good progress. Most children come into care at the right time and when it is in their best interests. The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) and the judiciary report an improving picture of practice.
15. When children in care are placed with their parents, these decisions are well informed and supported via thorough assessment and planning.
16. The newly formed multidisciplinary service, which includes a specialist assessment team, and the family partnership team are having a positive impact. They have helped parents to improve their skills and safely meet their children's needs. The initial feedback from parents has been positive; they describe being enabled to understand why specific recommendations regarding their children's longer-term care have been made.
17. When children cannot return home, there is thorough consideration of all the options, and permanence is explored early. Children are successfully adopted, made the subject of special guardianship orders, placed with connected carers or are long-term matched with foster carers. This is giving children the certainty, stability and security that they need. Robust permanence tracking systems and effective independent reviewing officer oversight help ensure that permanence is achieved for most children as soon as is possible.
18. Children live with carers who meet their needs well and enable them to make good progress in all aspects of their lives. Children's health and educational needs are very well met. Children enjoy a wide range of leisure and enrichment activities, which positively contribute to their increased confidence and self-esteem.
19. A small number of children live in unregistered children's homes. There is regular and effective multi-agency oversight of these arrangements while more

suitable registered arrangements are sought. A small number of these children with complex needs have had several moves before the right home is identified.

20. Children are visited regularly by social workers who know them well. However, the quality and impact of social work practice are variable and not all social workers consistently undertake creative and purposeful direct work with children, including life-story work. Some children have experienced too many changes of social worker.
21. Assessments and plans are detailed and contain all the pertinent information needed to support children and meet their needs. They are regularly reviewed, and in most, children's voices and views are apparent.
22. Family time is well supported and encouraged when it is in the child's best interests. There is good consideration of family time for brothers and sisters, who may be separated. Social workers are creative in ensuring that family time in some form continues, including post-adoption.
23. Children are well supported by advocates and independent visitors. There is a vibrant approach to participation, and the Medway Children and Young People Council has influenced service developments. The independent reviewing officers provide additional oversight, with improved challenge and support on behalf of children.
24. Children in care are known well by staff in the virtual school. These staff work well with schools, both in the borough and beyond, to support children in care to have positive academic outcomes. The bespoke support in place for children has a positive impact on their experiences, and children are involved in the creation and review of their personal education plans.
25. Foster carers are well supported and feel valued following the recent positive changes and developments in the fostering service. Foster carers have welcomed the amendment to the fee structure system. Assessments of prospective carers are of a good standard, and carers receive training that enables them to meet the needs of the children in their care.
26. Since the local authority has joined the regional adoption agency (Adoption Partnership South East), there have been improvements in the timeliness of identifying suitable adopters for Medway children. There is a strong and robust approach to adoption in Medway. Prospective adopters are suitably assessed and prepared for the parenting roles they are about to embark on. The partnership is appropriately prioritising the recruitment of adopters to meet the needs of Medway children. Children do not wait long to be matched and once placed, they achieve permanence.
27. Children approaching transition to adult services are consulted about their wishes and aspirations for their future. This information is included when

developing their pathway plans. For some disabled children, transition planning is not started early enough. Senior leaders are aware of this and recent changes have been implemented to address this issue.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

28. The service for care leavers has significantly improved since the previous inspection in 2019. Personal advisers are strong advocates for their young people. They know young people well and are committed, caring and dedicated to improving their lives.
29. Personal advisers visit young people at a frequency that meets their needs. They provide practical help and advice to young people. The care leaver hub is a warm and welcoming environment. It is a safe space where young people can meet, socialise, attend groups and access support from their personal advisers, who are based there.
30. Young people's pathway plans are mostly written with young people and are clear about the actions required to help them to achieve their goals.
31. Personal advisers support care leavers to develop the skills and confidence to live more independently. Care leavers told inspectors that when they moved into their own accommodation, they felt well prepared.
32. While most care leavers live in suitable accommodation which meets their needs, there is a lack of choice of accommodation for some young people with the most complex needs, resulting in a minority living in temporary accommodation. The specialist housing adviser helps personal advisers and young people navigate housing processes, which prevents homelessness.
33. A good number of care leavers benefit from continuing to live with their foster carers when they turn 18, either via staying put or shared lives arrangements.
34. Increasing numbers of care leavers benefit from the help and support provided by 'navigators'. They help young people to access health services, support them with developing independence skills and reduce social isolation. Challenges remain, however, with the availability and accessibility of emotional and mental health support for care leavers. It is particularly difficult for care leavers to access support in this area if they were not previously receiving it as children. This can impact on their well-being during the early part of their adult lives. However, navigators are effective at supporting care leavers to access varying types of support. Senior leaders continue to develop and improve the local provision to meet this need.
35. Care leavers are well supported to achieve in education, training or employment. Personal advisers and young people value the support from the

in-house 'aspirations adviser', who is helping more young people to access education, training and employment.

36. Young people who are at risk of exploitation, are in custody and/or are parents themselves are effectively and well supported by their dedicated personal advisers. The input of the specialist parenting worker for care-experienced parents is well received by parents, and care leavers say it makes a real difference to their daily lives and how they meet their children's needs.
37. There has been a recent increase in the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Most unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers are well supported by their personal advisers, who visit them in line with their needs. Personal advisers keep their pathway plans up to date and they consider the impact of young people's journey into the UK, associated trauma, and their unique characteristics and needs when formulating plans.
38. Care-experienced young people aged over 21 continue to receive support from their personal advisers should they still have a need and when they want the support to continue.
39. The care leaver offer is easily accessible and details the statutory and supplementary support and assistance that young people are entitled to receive.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: good

40. Improving the quality of support for the children of Medway is a clear priority for the collective corporate leadership team. There is now a mutual understanding of and focus on children in Medway, which is seen in all parts of the corporate, political and operational leadership. There has been significant investment and commitment by leaders. They have focused on improving support for vulnerable children, children in care and care leavers, alongside the broader strategic approach of 'Child Friendly Medway', which has included all parts of the council and community of Medway. This has raised the awareness of others and the profile of children in care and care-experienced young people.
41. Senior leaders maintain close oversight and scrutiny of the impact of practice on children's lives. There is a realistic understanding about what is important to children and their families, informed by regular engagement with them. Children matter in Medway, and senior leaders refer to the 'family business', offering work experience opportunities and apprenticeships to their care-experienced young people. These lead to meaningful longer-term employment opportunities.
42. There have been significant improvements since the inspection in 2019, specifically in the quality and impact of the corporate parenting board. The

voice of children is heard loud and clear by all members of the corporate parenting board through the attendance of representatives from the Medway Children in Care Council. There is a real presence and understanding of the child's voice in all corporate meetings and decision-making forums.

43. There have been recent changes in both corporate and political leadership in Medway, and the members of the new leadership team have given their ongoing commitment and support to the continuing improvement journey of children's services.
44. Relationships with partners have been forged and developed. Children in Medway benefit from this more cohesive and collaborative approach.
45. There is a stable senior leadership team in place for children's services. The members of this team have a clear and realistic understanding of the further improvements needed to ensure that all children receive a consistently good or better service. There has been a relentless approach to improvement, which has led to significant progress and development in practice and management oversight of pre-proceedings, achieving permanence and the services offered to care-experienced young people. However, there is more to do to further improve practice with adolescents and those at risk of exploitation.
46. Senior leaders have a clear line of sight of the quality and impact of practice. This is informed by robust and effective quality assurance processes, feedback gathered from children and families and surveys completed by partners and staff. The newly formed Practice Development Service, which combines both quality assurance and learning and development oversight, has strengthened the chosen approach to promote learning and development in practice while creating accountability and quality and consistency of social work practice. Senior leaders have amended their processes and supervision oversight to ensure that weaknesses identified by audit activity are addressed. They also continue to moderate all their audit activity, which provides an additional line of sight and scrutiny.
47. The local authority has refocused its chosen social work approach, supporting all staff to continue to develop their skills and to practice in line with this. The application of this approach is seen throughout most social work interventions.
48. Senior leaders have embedded in practice the regular use and application of their data monitoring tools, which support managers and staff with timeliness and task management. Senior leaders and managers use these tools effectively to inform their understanding of caseloads and demands in the service, which then directs them in their targeting of additional capacity and development to meet need.
49. Senior leaders have embraced and developed every possible measure to ensure that they offer the current workforce the best possible environment to practice

in, which is supportive yet holds social workers to account for their practice and development.

50. There have been significant challenges regarding the recruitment and retention of the workforce. Leaders have been persistent and creative in their activities to increase the capacity and stability of the workforce. They have improved their offer of learning and development opportunities for social workers. They have increased the size of the workforce to reduce caseloads, which has given staff time to develop their practice and work more effectively. There continue to be significant challenges in this area, but leaders have effective oversight of this and mobilise the workforce to address these challenges. They know that they need to continue their work in this area.
51. There has been improvement in the impact and quality of management oversight and supervision, but the quality of this is not yet consistently applied to all casework. Senior leaders recognise this, and provide newer managers with the additional support, development and training opportunities needed to improve the quality of their management oversight and grip.

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