

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

7 March 2024

Attendance of the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Adam Price, Portfolio Holder for Childrens 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 their ambitions for their areas of responsibility, how they have and will undertake political challenge and leadership and what their priorities and ambitions are for the year ahead. It covers the period from April 2023 until February 2024.

1. Recommendation

- 1.1. The Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee are asked to note the report.

2. Budget and policy framework

- 2.1 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
- SEND Transport

- 2.2 This report sets out how as portfolio holder for Children's Services I have supported Cabinet and the service in ensuring income and expenditure remain within the budget approved by the Council.
- 2.3 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, pressures on Council budgets 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. I have worked with the service and Council colleagues to ensure that whilst efficiency savings are identified and delivered, the service for our children and families continues to meet our statutory responsibilities.

3. Background

- 3.1 I was appointed to the role of Lead Member for Children's Services when the Labour party took over the administration of the Council in May 2023. Since then, I have been proud to work closely with Children's Services who have continued to work with our children and families providing support and assistance. The council also works closely with statutory and voluntary 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.
- 3.2 I would also like to thank Children's Services staff and leaders in Medway for their continued commitment to driving improvement, which was recognised in the Ofsted ILAC re-inspection which took place in July 2023 and the Joint Area SEND Inspection which took place in February 2024. Despite the pressure of the pandemic, I am pleased and very proud of the progress that has been made, which was recognised in the ILAC overall judgement of Good. We await the publication of the SEND inspection on the 22nd of March.

4. Providing political leadership and challenge

- 4.1 Following the ILACs inspection, the Statutory Direction was lifted by the Minister. However, it was agreed by all partners that in order to support continued and sustained improvement the Improvement Board would be re-launched as a Continuous Improvement Board and would have oversight of the updated improvement plan. Colleagues from partner agencies, including education, health and police, are central to the effectiveness of the board and this will help to ensure continued improvements in the support that children receive.
- 4.2 I was a member of the Children's Improvement Board and will continue to be a member of the new Continuous Improvement Board which will give me an insight into progress. The Board includes statutory partners, with voluntary attendance from the LGA and our DFE adviser. As a member I have the

opportunity to review progress on the plan and contribute to Board discussions about how to support ongoing improvements to the service.

- 4.3 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 data workshops for scrutiny Members to promote better understanding of performance and service delivery.
- 4.4 As chairperson of Corporate Parenting Board, I have also been pleased to continue the work of my predecessor as Lead Member 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 support implementation of a themed programme of work for the board.
- 4.5 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.
- 4.6 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.
- 4.7 Along with the Leader and Chief Executive, I meet three times a year with the DCS, the Children's Services Assistant Director (AD), and Head of Improvement 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.
- 4.8 As chairperson 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 SEND 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.
- 4.9 Alongside, Deputy Director Children's Services – SEND for NHS Kent and Medway, I chair the SEND Partnership Board. This ensures joint oversight

over the SEND improvement journey and delivery of the strategy and action plan.

5 Championing the Interests of Children and Young People

- 5.1 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 the views of children and young people about the services they receive.
- 5.2 I regularly visit our services in the community, including schools, Parklands (our respite home for disabled children), and our hub for Care Experienced young people based at the Elaine Centre, to meet with children, young people and families and speak to service providers about their role and what could improve their services.
- 5.3 I meet with our workforce regularly, either through attending events as above, visiting our office bases or taking part in training and Staff Conferences. I was delighted to be part of an event which celebrated the achievement of the service in moving out of statutory intervention.
- 5.4 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.
- 5.5 I am pleased to be able to celebrate the achievements of our children and young people in Medway and this year I have attended our Youth Awards
- 5.6 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.

6 Support for key social care service areas

6.1 Commissioning

- 6.1.1 Medway have continued to see increasing challenges in meeting the placement needs of Medway's children. The outcome of the Council's Judicial Review has seen an increase in asylum seeking young people being placed in Medway's care. The Council must have the right offer in place to manage this demand with appropriate placements and support in place. I have received regular briefings regarding the Council's response to this growing group of young people.

- 6.1.2 I have worked closely with the Leader to oversee the work of the Children's Services AD and head of Commissioning who work together to address the challenges posed by a shortage of available placements for children in our care. This has included commissioning additional emergency placement beds, respite foster care placements, and reviewing supported accommodation. The leader and I have been actively involved in overseeing 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. I am pleased that this provision will be open and available for our children in the coming months.
- 6.1.3 I have been actively engaged in discussion about the Children's Services budget and am particularly pleased that the introduction of Panels and increased oversight of spend on placements has resulted in achievement of significant savings during the year 2023-24 against the placement budget.

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

- 6.2.1 I have supported the appointment of a new Head of Provider Services who will take up post in February. This post holder is responsible for our in-house fostering service, Parklands, our residential respite home, and the Youth Service. In addition, the role oversees the multi-disciplinary service which is now embedded and provides our workforce with seamless access to timely and effective wrap around support for families, particularly for those on the edge of care. Provider Services also includes the Family Partnership, Adolescent support, Family Group Conferencing, and a Specialist Assessment Team which is delivering high quality work recognised by the courts, thus avoiding the use of Independent Social Workers.
- 6.2.2 Our in-house fostering service continues to provide additional support and training for our carers, to help them to look after our more vulnerable children. 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. 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.
- 6.2.3 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 well embedded. In 2023, Medway have had 16 children who have been adopted. 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.

6.3. Children's Social Work and 0-25

- 6.3.1 The Children's Social Work service, which focuses on support and intervention for children in need now includes 8 Children's Social Work teams and the Children and Young People with a Disability service (CYPD). In June 2023, services for disabled children were realigned, with the CYPD service moving to a service for children aged 0-17, and the 18-25 team moving into Adult Services to better support those young people to prepare for adulthood. The ILACS confirmed that there are still some improvements to be made to our services to all disabled children in Medway but this work is continuing and progress has been noted in performance. The service has benefited during the year from the additional staffing capacity from the bank team in covering staffing vacancies, but recruitment has been positive and a new Service Manager appointed who will join in March 2024. The creation of a Designated Social Care Officer in the Service has helped to bring increased focus on transition and preparing young people for adulthood.
- 6.3.2 Following the ILACS, it was decided to transfer responsibility for our work with vulnerable adolescents into our social work teams, in order to provide a more consistent response. There had been particular challenges in recruiting into the specialist adolescent teams, resulting in unfilled vacancies and gaps in provision. All work with this vulnerable group of young people has now been transferred into the social work teams, and is beginning to deliver more consistent intervention for young people.
- 6.3.3 The service saw an increase in need in early summer 2023, peaking in June, with more children in need referred into the service. However, numbers have reduced over the second half of the year, with concerted effort from the teams to support throughput of work. As a result, numbers of children subject to child protection plans have reduced from 355 in August to 273 in December 2023, and Child in Need plans reduce from a peak of 664 in July 2023 to 581 in December 2023. I have ensured oversight of the data 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.
- 6.3.4 The Children's Social Work service has continued to experience significant staff turnover and unfilled vacancies over the last year. 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 continued funding for additional bank workers and project teams to provide essential capacity to ensure all our children have an allocated social worker. The project teams are being phased out as posts are filled and demand reduces, and will exit the service by March 2024.

6.4 Medway Safeguarding Children's Partnership

- 6.4.1 Medway Council, Kent Police and NHS Kent and Medway are the three safeguarding partners that make up the Medway Safeguarding Children Partnership (MSCP). The purpose of the MSCP is to support and enable local organisations and agencies to work together.

- 6.4.2 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 holds 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.
- 6.4.3 During the year, I am aware that the MSCP published one Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review (LCSPP) in September 2023 in relation to Isabel, a three month old who sadly died and also completed 3 Rapid Reviews. The reviews identified good practice and lessons arising from the review for both individual agencies and the safeguarding children partnership. Through the MSCP Executive I am assured that the notification process to trigger LCSPP and Rapid Reviews is effective and that the numbers are in line with expected trends.

6.5 Early Help

- 6.5.1. I continue to support the delivery of the Early Help Strategy which was launched in July 2021. The Early Help Partnership Board are promoting a shared vision, joint priorities, and services, ensuring the best possible outcomes for children. Partners continue to be involved in the 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.
- 6.5.2. Family Solutions' relationship with children's statutory services continues to strengthen and this has been supported by the realignment of services, one shared database (MOSAIC) and improved performance management and data reporting. I am confident that Family Solutions continues to build on relationships with partners in Education, Health and across Medway.

6.6 Youth Services

- 6.6.1 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.
- 6.6.2 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, including a project based at the hospital to respond to young people presenting at A and E, and a project working around

the railway stations to support young people who are missing or at risk of exploitation. The external funding provides additional capacity for specific purposes rather than reducing the cost of the youth service.

- 6.6.3. I play an active role in supporting the youth service, undertaking safeguarding visits and supporting the youth awards event.

6.7 Youth Offending Team

6.7.1 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. To date in Medway there has been one child sentenced to custody in November 2024. This in itself has been significant in that it ended a long period of over a year during which no children received custodial sentences in Medway. I have been made aware of a number of children who have serious offences progressing through the courts that may result in custodial sentences. The Youth Offending Team continues to seek to provide the court with robust alternatives to custody and to enable children to be subject to sentences in the community where this is safe to do so.

6.7.2. I am pleased to see that the Youth Offending Team continues in its aspiration to develop best practice in working with children in the Youth Justice System. The 2023-2024 local Youth Justice Plan represents a real commitment to developing Child First approaches to working with children in the Youth Justice System. 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 2024 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. I am delighted that to date over 40 children have received a AQA qualification for the work that they have undertaken with the Youth Offending Team.

6.7.3. 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. It is positive to see that in 2023/2024, 24 children have completed this programme.

6.8 Support to children in our care and care leavers

6.8.1 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 only increased by 13 since April (from 483 to 496). We currently have 23 Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking children aged between 14 and 17 years in our care, compared with 2 at the end of January 2023. 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. There has been a reduction in the percentage of children in matched long term fostering compared with a year ago – now 48%, but this is higher than 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.

6.8.2 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. The Virtual School moved under the management of our Education and SEND service at beginning of February.

6.8.3. I am aware that the service continues to engage with children and young people to hear their views. The app Mind of My Own is well used and Medway Children and Young People Council (MCYPC) is engaging with and capturing the voices of our children and young people. Over the last year, young people have routinely been involved in interviews of senior staff and their insights are highly valued.

6.8.4. The service has seen a steady increase in the numbers of young people in our leaving care service, with currently 190 young people receiving support. Due to investment in the service last year, 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. Ofsted inspectors recognised the valuable contribution of the Aspirations officer in the Leaving Care service and am pleased that this additional capacity has resulted in continued improvement in the percentage of our young people who are in Education Training and Employment, now 50% 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 facilitate regular parenting groups, independent living skills training, and housing advice and support, alongside drop in facilities.

6.9 Corporate Parenting

6.9.1 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 have taken over responsibility following the May elections for chairing our Corporate Parenting Board and I work closely with other councillors and officers to deliver against

our strategy and improve outcomes for our children in care and care leavers, ensuring the Board maintains its agreed priorities.

- 6.9.2 The Corporate Parenting Board (CPB) meets bi-monthly with 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.
- 6.9.3 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, and this progress was recognised by Ofsted inspectors.
- 6.9.4 Over the last year, work has taken place to support newly elected members to support the corporate parenting function across the Council. 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. The new administration has an absolute commitment to corporate parenting, and this is reflected in the work of the Board.
- 6.9.5 There is now a more structured approach to the CPB function, and the Board works to 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
- 6.9.6 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. The Board ensures there is feedback to our children and young people after each Board meeting.
- 6.9.7 The interface between the CPB and the Medway Children and Young People's Council (MCYPC) continues to be strong. A new representative of

MCYPC has been nominated this year to attend 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.

6.9.8 The CPB receives a summary of performance data at each meeting in addition to the performance reports of each sub-group. A programme of performance workshops delivered by the AD, Children's Services, has continued to support newly elected 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.

6.9.9 The Corporate Parenting Board has agreed a refreshed and updated Corporate Parenting Strategy this year, which was developed in consultation with young people; this will be monitored and reported on through the coming year.

7 Inclusion

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

8. Permanent Exclusion and Suspension Summary

8.1 Medway continues to permanently exclude less learners than national and numbers have reduced significantly this academic year. There have been 6 Permanent Exclusions between Sept and Dec 2023, compared to 19, for the same period in 2022.

Suspensions

8.2 Medway schools continue to suspend learners at a greater rate than national, and the rate of suspension has increased further in 2023. Suspensions caused by persistent disruptive behaviour were the most frequent. Unlike permanent exclusions, suspensions are issued in excess of the national rate in secondary and special schools, with the highest frequency occurring between the ages of 11 and 16.

8.3 Learners who are suspended the most are those identified as SEND Support and in receipt of FSM. A high proportion of suspensions are for learners with an EHCP.

8.4 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.

8.5 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 programme to embed trauma informed practice across Medway schools and education and children's services partnership.
- We have undertaken a thorough and robust review of our Alternative Provision (AP) offer and increased the capacity of AP to support pre-emptive and reintegration activity, including assessment placements and outreach.

9. Support to Children and Young People with SEND

9.1 I have overseen the continuation of the action plan relating to the SEND Strategy for the 2022-2025 period which sets out the priorities for Children and Young People with SEND.

9.2 Alongside, Deputy Director Children's Services – SEND, NHS Kent and Medway, I chair the SEND Partnership Board and we have been working with our partners to prepare for the Government's new Local Area SEND Inspection Framework. We were inspected under the new framework in February, and we expect the report to be published on the 22nd March.

Activity on the improvement journey in the last 12 months has included:

- 1) Greater co-production collaboration with Medway Parents and Carers forum, with professionals attending focused events, marketplaces and coffee mornings.
- 2) The roll out of outreach, assessment and reintegration support for schools.
- 3) Restructure of the councils Education and SEND teams to effectiveness of operations. The new structure provides for:
 - The introduction of area teams to provide front facing, joined up support for families. These teams will be equipped to handle the range of issues presented by families, including SEND, EHE (Elective Home Education), CME (Child Missing Education), Attendance and Exclusions, from early years through to post-16. The teams will manage the caseloads and be able to determine the most appropriate professional to lead with each family.
 - The creation of multi-disciplinary teams, in the hubs, to ensure the flow of information and coordination of response, centred around

the child and family. In the Hubs, the teams will be working alongside the other agencies, family solutions, early help, etc and be able to join up on the support seamlessly.

- Improved communication with families, in the community, for example, times to be set for parent/carer drop-ins to ask for support.
 - The creation of 4 Area Inclusion Leads to lead the work of the team. Having an integrated team removes single points of failure and ensures cases are not delayed in the event of absence.
 - Increased level of business support for the management of area work, including EHCP writing and parental communication, freeing up specialist staff to conduct their core business.
 - Increased the capacity of the teams for SEND work.
 - Specific school services teams with greater capacity, to ensure that core functions are maintained.
 - Clear lines of accountability for statutory duties (cross cutting) and a broader distributed leadership team.
 - School improvement and quality function to focus on the quality of education across the age range, including those in specialist teaching for SEND and Sensory needs, and Early Years.
- 4) The rollout of a Banded Funding Matrix – ensuring that there is fair and transparent funding available to all schools in Medway based on the child's level of need and that the funding follows the child.
- 5) A change to the SEN Notional Budget Policy which provides additional SEN notional funding to those schools supporting higher than the national average pupils with EHCPs.

9.3 Furthermore, I receive regular assurance that our Safety Valve (SV) intervention programme is progressing as planned. The programme of improvement, due to complete in 2026, is meeting both the quality and financial targets it set out to do, including:

- 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 there has been a 45% reduction in the number requests for EHCPs.
- 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 schools has increased from 31.2% to 33.8% in the last year.
- 3) Ensuring the use of appropriate and cost-effective provision and sufficiency of provision through our commissioning teams and SEND capital programme.

- 4) We are on track to meet the deficit control and reduction targets set out in its Safety Valve Agreement by the end of the programme. As of this years round 3 monitoring, our in year high needs forecast is predicting an in-year surplus of £1.457m, (in-line with our SVA) which is a significant improvement from the 2021-22 financial in-year deficit of £9m.

10. SEND Travel Assistance

- 10.1. SEND transport is overseen by the School Admissions and Transport team. The team are responsible for providing appropriate travel assistance for children and young people with SEND who meet the criteria for assistance. This includes options such as providing a fuel allowance or bus/train passes and procuring shared and solo transport from a range of providers.
- 10.2 The team provide a coordinated approach, working closely with providers, parents, and schools, ensuring that each pupil's needs are met. Currently 1869 (Dec 23) pupils are receiving travel assistance.
- 10.3 The cost of transport has seen a significant increase over the past few years and I have been working with officers and Medway Parents and Carers to look at our options to reduce costs whilst maintaining appropriate travel assistance in line with our statutory duties.

11 Closing comments

- 11.1 I continue to be fully supportive of the service and the work which is being undertaken in challenging circumstances for all of our children and young people in Medway, and am committed to supporting continued progress across all service areas for which I am responsible.

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Appendices

None

Background papers

None