

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

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Children's Commissioning Quality Assurance Processes of Children's Places and Young Inspectors

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Summary

Quality assurance (QA) is an integral component of the commissioning and improvement cycle by which standards are set, impact is monitored, and information serves to improve services and outcomes for our children and young people.

This report provides Medway Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee with the following updates on:

1. The Quality Assurance work undertaken by the Children's Commissioning Quality Assurance (QA) team.
2. New initiatives/processes to strengthen the QA process, achieve better outcomes, and joint working with key stakeholders, internal and external to the Council.
3. Partnership working with the Regional Care Co-operative (RCC) and Jersey Council, leading on implementation of good practice and robust QA oversight.
4. Young Inspectors programme sufficiency and initiative.

1. Recommendations

- 1.1 The Committee is asked to note the continued improvement and development of the Quality Assurance (QA) Team, and implementation of robust and efficient processes to raise quality standards in Medway and out of area and improved mapping of service providers in Medway and surrounding areas.
- 1.2 The Committee is asked to note the robust oversight and Quality Assurance monitoring of 'unregistered' and Embargoed placements in line with Medway Councils High Risk Placement Process, recognised by Ofsted during the 2023 CIC Inspection and monitoring inspection 2025.

- 1.3 The Committee is asked to note the Quality Assurance team to lead on partnership working with partner local authorities, Regional Care Co-operative (RCC), Jersey Council and external agencies to embed robust quality assurance practice across the South East.
- 1.4 The Committee is asked to note the continuation and expansion of the Young Inspectors Programme beyond the pilot phase and support the integration of the programme into the wider QA Framework and Inspection Cycle.

2. Budget and Policy Framework

- 2.1 The Quality Assurance function aligns with current national Ofsted/CQC/Care Inspectorate regulatory expectations, it supports statutory responsibilities to ensure children and young people are safe, develop well, and have access to high quality services.
- 2.2 The Young Inspectors' programme aligns with Medway Council's Quality Assurance framework and national Ofsted regulatory expectations. It supports statutory responsibilities regarding the participation of young people in care and continuous improvement of care provisions.
- 2.3 The Quality Assurance function and Young Inspectors role supports Medway Council to meet its sufficiency responsibilities under the Children's Act 1989.
- 2.4 Budgetary considerations for the Young Inspectors Programme include training, DBS checks, staff time, incentives and support for young inspectors. There are limited financial budgetary implications beyond the lifetime of the pilot.
- 2.5 Budgetary considerations for the Quality Assurance Function and wider partnership work include staff training, staff resources, travel, and recruitment.

3. Background

- 3.1 In 2019 the Children's Commissioning and Quality Assurance Team consisted of 1 Senior Commissioning Officer who was responsible for commissioning, contract management and quality assurance oversight for Children's Services. A QA Framework was developed in 2019 which remained in place until April 2025.
- 3.2 From 2020 – 2025 the Quality Assurance Team has been allocated additional resource, and the team now consists of 1 Programme Lead, 1 Senior Commissioning Officer and 2 Quality Assurance Officers (1 Post is actively being recruited to).
- 3.3 Over the last 5 years the Quality Assurance function has been able to develop and implement robust systems and processes which have supported the improvement of quality standards, stability of placements/services, value for money, partnership working and decision making.

3.4 Quality Assurance embraces all the activity that contributes to continual service improvement, ensuring agreed standards are being met, and outcomes for children and young people are being achieved.

3.5 Key Components of the Quality Assurance Function:

- Monitoring of the overarching performance and quality standards for all commissioned services including Independent Fostering Agencies, Residential, Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND), Supported Accommodation, Floating Support, Parent and Child, Short Breaks, internal commissioned services and bespoke commissioning arrangements. Including completion of compliance reviews and QA Visits.
- Robust tracking of all QA Activity, monitoring trends and activity across all services, risk rating concerns and safeguarding matters to ensure effective and prompt responses to issues.
- Maintaining an up-to-date Provider sanctions list of all known and unknown providers located in Medway and out of area, to support risk management and wider mapping of services operating in Medway.
- Facilitate lessons learnt discussions and action planning with professionals and providers where practice was inadequate, or shortfalls identified.
- Hold providers to account where practice has been poor, and support providers to improve in quality.
- Work in partnership with key professionals (Social work teams, Senior Management, Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO)/Safeguarding, Youth Offending Team (YOT), Police) attending strategy meetings, professionals meeting, LADO meetings. Conduct joint visits with professionals to support wider service improvement.
- Collating and tracking key intelligence to provide a holistic overview of services, including monitoring of all Ofsted alerts, Planning Requests, Out of Area placement alerts, LADO cases and information shared via external stakeholders.

4. Advice and Analysis

4.1 By developing and improving our quality assurance processes and oversight we have increased the number of cases/issues dealt with annually, resulting in improved quality and outcomes, improved stability and more robust oversight of commissioned services.

Figure 1 QA Activity – Number of QA Cases Dealt with annually (calendar year)

2023	2024	2025 (January – April)
911	662	404

- 4.2 The QA team sits centrally amongst various teams including Access to Resources, Commissioning, Social Care, LADO, and Health supporting stronger multi-agency working. By working in partnership with supporting teams it has allowed quality assurance to address quality or contractual issues at source rather than working in isolation.

Figure 2 – Number of multi-agency meetings/visits attended by the quality assurance team (Including but not limited to Strategy Meetings, professional Meeting, Planning Meeting, Risk Management Meetings, LADO/Allegation Management meetings, QA Visits)

2023	2024	2025 (January – April)
628	656	228

- 4.3 The Quality Assurance processes; oversight and risk management of ‘unregistered’ placements and embargoed placements have been recognised by Ofsted during the 2023 CIC Inspection and monitoring inspection 2025. Ofsted have complimented the risk management oversight of our high-risk placements.
- 4.4 The Quality Assurance team have built and maintained strong relationships with the regulatory bodies (Ofsted/Care Quality Commission/Care Inspectorate) which has allowed us to effectively share intelligence on regulated services, contributing to the wider safeguarding for all children and young people. Our quality assurance team has been able to identify concerns prior to Ofsted and as a result through our information sharing, we have promoted the regulatory bodies to conduct unannounced visits.

Figure 3 – Number of Ofsted Alerts/Notifications reviewed, monitored and tracked annually

2023	2024	2025 (January – April)
495	188	69

- 4.4.1 In 2023 the Quality Assurance team saw a 400% increase in Ofsted alerts and notifications, this sudden increase was as a result of the pandemic and Ofsted not conducting visits or inspections during 2020 – 2022. Despite the limited oversight from Ofsted, Medway Council’s Quality Assurance team maintained full operation, and adapted processes to accommodate the pandemic restrictions. Through the continued work and robust oversight from the quality assurance team, of the 495 alerts received in 2023 only 9 directly impacted Medway Children and Young People and had minimal impact on the stability and outcomes of those placed.
- 4.5 The Quality Assurance team have successfully supported 34 providers to meet Ofsted regulations and become regulated to provide care and support to children and young people. The Quality Assurance team proactively support

providers to raise their standards and ensure they remain compliant with the regulatory requirements.

- 4.6 Since 2020 the Quality Assurance team have developed robust systems to track and collate intelligence on commissioned services operating in Medway this includes working in partnership with:
- Planning department, providing information on applicants proposing change of use for Children's homes.
 - LADO Service, attending 4 weekly meetings to review cases and support on LADO meetings to address quality and contractual concerns.
 - Police/Police Community Support Officer's (PCSO), regularly share information on known addresses operating services so that they are more informed.
- 4.7 The Quality Assurance team are active members of CCRAAG (Children's Cross Regional Arrangements Group) leading on quality assurance allocations and information sharing, supporting the development of a consistent risk management approach for complex safeguarding concerns involving multiple placing local authorities. By utilizing the CCRAAG Platform the quality assurance team has saved valuable time and resources by working in partnership working with other local authorities.
- 4.8 Medway Council's Quality Assurance process and systems have been recognised by the Regional Care Co-operative (RCC) and have been asked to lead on the delivery of QA Frameworks across the Southeast. The RCC have suggested possibly funding a couple of job posts with the QA Team to support the implementation of 'Good Practice' and increased QA oversight into commissioned services across the Southeast.
- 4.9 Medway Council's Quality Assurance Team are working in partnership with Jersey Council to deliver robust quality assurance oversight on current Jersey placements both on island and off island.
- 4.10 Initial implementation of the Young Inspectors programme has seen positive engagement, with four care leavers signing up for the pilot. Training covers inspection techniques, safeguarding, and feedback delivery. The process includes joint inspections, structured reporting, and provider feedback. Expected benefits include service improvements, the voice of the young people in care and care leavers, and stronger accountability.

5. Young Inspectors Programme

- 5.1 Supported accommodation for 16–18-year-olds is critical for those transitioning to independence. However, variability in provision quality and insufficient youth involvement in oversight processes persist. The Young Inspectors Programme was created to address this gap by enabling young people to inspect and assess the very services they experienced.

- 5.2 In line with our corporate commitment to hearing the voice of young people and for them to inform how we work we have targeted Care Leavers for this project who have firsthand experience of the care system. This means it gives us insight into what a “good” provision looks like and creates valuable experience for the young people and may lead into long term positions within the team.
- 5.3 With the introduction of new Ofsted regulations for supported accommodation, providers will only be formally inspected every 3-5 years, placing increased responsibility on Medway’s Quality Assurance (QA) team to ensure that standards are continuously met in between regulatory inspections.
- 5.4 The Young Inspectors Programme was developed to address there gaps by involving young people in inspecting and assessing the services they experience. This initiative emphasizes the voice of young people in care and care leavers, ensuring services reflect lived experience and contribute to continuous quality improvement.

6. Consultation

- 6.1 Quality Assurance have consulted with key partners, including young people, social workers, Independent Reviewing Officers, Health, LADO, Police to ensure our current QA processes and systems support the wider functions of the council and service, this is reflected in our current QA Framework.
- 6.2 Consultation with young people took place as part of the development of Medway Council’s QA Framework and Supported Accommodation Dynamic Purchasing System.
- 6.3 Young people in care and care leavers were invited to an information session, leading to initial recruitment for the Young Inspectors. Their input has shaped the training and inspection template/report. Ongoing feedback loops will continue to involve young people and service providers in refining the programme.
- 6.4 Where appropriate we always try and capture the views of young people withing our QA visits to ensure we get a rounded view.

7. Risk Management

- 7.1 Risk Management is an integral part of Quality Assurance and Commissioning, the following table identifies and considers known risks:

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Provider non-compliance	Non-compliance to Ofsted/regulatory regulations and Quality Standards, resulting in poor practise,	Completion of regular compliance reviews. Quality Assurance Visits.	BII

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
	safeguarding concerns and placement breakdowns.	Attendance at professional meetings. Review of reports/logs to monitor practise. Close working with LADO to ensure safeguarding practise is embedded. Action Plans/Embargoes.	
Un-reliable/Misleading provider information	Inconsistent, and misleading information provided by service providers. Leading to non-compliance, poor practise, confusion amongst professionals.	Maintain robust tracker and provider database. Verify and clarify any information provided. Share key information with key professionals. Professionally challenge providers.	BIII
Unregistered Providers	Providers operating who are not yet regulated by Ofsted. Providers acting unlawfully. High risks associated with these settings. Unknown addresses/providers operating in Medway, housing OOA placements.	Monitor planning application requests and provide feedback. Collate intelligence from POLA, LADO, Police to map services. Provide prompt responses to Cllr/Resident Complaints. Ensure Provider sanctions list remains up to date and accurate.	AIII
Embargoed/ Sanctioned Services	Higher numbers of providers subject to regulatory and council sanctions, including embargos. As a result, other placing LA's tend to	Working with partner local authorities to ensure risk mitigation is completed.	BIII

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
	place vulnerable YP with poor quality providers, leading to higher complaints, and disturbances.	Collate intelligence from POLA, LADO, Police to map services. Provide prompt responses to Cllr/Resident Complaints. Ensure Provider sanctions list remains up to date and accurate.	
Conflict Management with residents (Young People in Care) or Provider Staff during site visits	During site visits situations may occur when young people are dysregulated, or heightened, requiring staff intervention or external professional support.	Risk assess situation and remove self if situation escalates. Alert line manager. Confirm visit before attending to ensure staff and residents are ok. Report any safeguarding concerns to appropriate teams.	CIII
Exposure to Distressing Situations, environments or information and Emotional impact on care experienced inspectors during the Young Inspectors Programme	Information pertaining to children and young people can be emotionally triggering, and distressing. Safeguarding situations discussed, and experienced can have an impact.	Regular supervision with line manager. Pre-visit briefings. Option to Opt-Out. Debrief support after inspections for young inspectors from PA, Team Manager and QA Lead.	BII

For risk rating, please refer to the following table:

<i>Likelihood</i>	<i>Impact:</i>
A Very likely B Likely C Unlikely D Rare	I Catastrophic II Major III Moderate IV Minor

8. Climate Change Implications

- 8.1 Potential to positively influence climate change by supporting children and young people to be moved back to Medway/Close to home by ensuring quality providers and services are available. By bringing Children and young people closer to home there will be a reduction in travel needs.
- 8.2 By working in partnership with CCRAG and other local authorities Medway Council has been able to reduce travel needs and avoided travelling 4205.85 Miles April 2024 – March 2025.
- 8.3 Any indirect implications (e.g. transport for inspections) will be considered during operational planning for The Young Inspectors Programme to ensure sustainability practices are followed e.g. Car share.

9. Financial Implications

- 9.1 The Children's Commissioning Service has an annual budget of £688,000 which includes the quality assurance team and is part funded by the better care fund. The resources required to continue to support the quality assurance process and expand the Young Inspectors Programme as outlined in the report will be managed from within existing budgets.

10. Legal Implications

- 10.1 The Quality Assurance function and Young Inspectors programme supports statutory duties under the Children Act 1989 and aligns with current regulatory requirements and legislation. They contribute to legal obligations around involving children and young people in decisions that affect them, ensuring they are safe and have access to good quality services.

11. Conclusions

- 11.1 The Quality Assurance in Medway has been recognised by Ofsted, Jersey and the Regional Care Co-Operative as being best practice. It has ensured the highest standards are expected and upheld for our children and young people and has often uncovered poor practice as well as recognised good practice before Ofsted. The Young inspectors programme although in its infancy also means true engagement and participation with young people and care leavers.
- 11.2 The team are well embedded within Children's Social Care and Education and work closely with Social Work Teams, practice Development and LADO. Communication with Ofsted is excellent. There are several potential opportunities to further embed our systems and processes across other areas in UK.

Lead officer contact

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – QA Framework – Children's Commissioning

Appendix 2 – Young Inspectors Briefing Paper April 2025

Background papers

None