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Dear Lee-Anne

Focused visit to Medway children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Medway children's services on 25 and 26 May 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors were Amanda Maxwell, Maire Atherton, Alexander Dignan, Lorna Schlechte and Janet Pearce.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

The methodology for this visit was in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. This visit was carried out fully by remote means. Inspectors used video calls for discussions with staff, children, managers and leaders within the local authority. The lead inspector and director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The analysis of need and planning for children who are at risk of harm and experiencing long-term neglect.
- Management oversight and case planning for children who are placed at a distance from Medway and children who go missing and are at risk of exploitation.
- The availability of and access to emotional health and well-being services for older children in care and care leavers.

Findings

- Since the last inspection in 2019, Medway Council has developed and begun to implement an improvement plan to address the identified serious practice shortfalls. An increasingly stable senior leadership team has made progress in developing the necessary foundations to develop and improve the consistency and quality of practice. There is a relentless focus on improvement and a determination to embed change across the service. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to delay in progressing some aspects of the improvement plan, such as embedding the local authority's approach to neglect. Senior leaders have responded swiftly to the challenges presented by the pandemic, developing new ways of working while continuing to deliver essential services. Individual risk assessments have ensured that the most vulnerable children have been seen regularly and face to face as needed. Relationships with partner agencies and community services have been strengthened. Effective relationships with education, schools and health partners have promoted effective coordination of services to children and their families throughout this period.
- Senior leaders have done much to improve and strengthen their performance framework and strategy. Leaders have a good grasp of the quality of social work practice throughout the service. They know themselves well and have a thorough understanding of the service's strengths, as well as the areas that require further development to improve practice and services for children.
- Since the monitoring visit in August 2020, improvements have been made and sustained within the multi-agency safeguarding hub. A new model of working, alongside a revised threshold document, was launched in April 2021, which has impacted positively on the quality and timeliness of referrals received from partner agencies and application of social work thresholds and decision-making. Comprehensive checks are completed by social workers, and there is consideration of family history. Management oversight is appropriate, providing a clear rationale for next steps.
- Most child protection enquiries are completed in a timely way. Strategy meetings are well attended by agency professionals and minutes demonstrate appropriate decision-making and set out clearly action to be taken. Assessment of need and risk is thorough and detailed, and management oversight and decision-making in this part of the service are thorough.
- Sometimes, children who meet the threshold for statutory support are inappropriately stepped down to early help. When this happens, the level of intervention does not always assist the family to achieve the necessary changes within timescales that meet the child's needs.
- Social workers have continued to visit children and gain their views and hear their voice throughout the pandemic. When COVID-19 infection rates were at their highest, individual assessments of risk enabled the local authority to ensure that the most vulnerable children were seen face to face. Increasingly, direct

work and purposeful visiting are informing an understanding of children's lived experiences.

- The quality of social work practice for children in need or in need of protection is variable. For some children who are experiencing neglect, over-optimism by professionals regarding parental capacity to change means that they are left in situations of risk for too long. For these children, there is often a lack of purposeful intervention and planning to address risk and avoid children coming into care on an emergency basis.
- There have been improvements to the oversight of systems, mapping and multi-agency work with children who go missing or who are at risk of exploitation. The multidisciplinary interventions to disrupt activities associated with exploitation are, for most children, thorough and effective in addressing risk. However, for children who are placed at a distance from Medway, more work is required to ensure that they consistently receive the same level of help to improve their circumstances and experiences.
- When safeguarding concerns about children increase, pre-proceedings work that takes place within the Public Law Outline (PLO) is mostly timely. However, in some cases, there have been historical delays in taking decisive action. As a result, those children had remained for too long in circumstances where they experienced harm. Senior managers have strengthened their oversight and review of PLO processes, which is improving children's experiences. When children are subject to pre-proceedings, family group conferences are routinely considered alongside other assessments to assist with longer-term decision-making.
- When children are on the edge of coming into local authority care, support is not consistently available as part of purposeful intervention with families. When children come into care, social workers carefully consider the most appropriate placement to meet their needs. Wherever possible, brothers and sisters live together. However, for a small number of vulnerable children living in unregistered settings, the levels of support provided vary and are not consistently well matched to their individual needs.
- Within the care leaver service, increased staffing levels are enabling social workers and personal advisers to establish and keep in touch with young people more regularly. Management oversight is not yet consistently identifying areas of weak practice that need to improve to ensure that all young people receive the help they need. Supervision occurs regularly; however, it does not always identify the action required to improve outcomes for young people. When appropriate actions are identified, these are not consistently reviewed, which can lead to drift and delay in young people's circumstances improving.
- During the pandemic, senior leaders have ensured that children in care have been able to access services to meet their emotional health needs, although the availability and access to such services for older children and care leavers are not

as extensive. Access to dental services for all children has been adversely affected due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- The local authority is effective in identifying and tracking families who are home-educating their children. Close partnership-working with schools during the pandemic has led to better communication and joined-up work to assure and maintain children's attendance at school, including those children who are vulnerable. Effective communication between schools and the local authority provides useful information about children who are missing education or are at risk of doing so. This has enabled leaders to make effective decisions to help safeguard children's welfare.
- Planning for care leavers' ongoing education, employment or training starts at an early age. However, the number of care leavers not in education, employment or training is high. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on young people's prospects for apprenticeships, employment and further education. Nevertheless, within the COVID-19 context, service leads have worked closely with education providers to promote care leavers' emotional well-being and support their education, employment or training ambitions.
- Leadership capacity in and oversight of the virtual school have been strengthened. Accountability and the profile of the virtual school have been raised in the local authority and among schools. The virtual school has made use of a wide range of resources to support children's learning and their mental health.
- The local authority has made progress in improving the stability, experience and skills of the workforce. Leaders are realistic about the improvements required to achieve their aspired outcome of consistently high-quality social work practice. Increased staffing levels have led to a reduction in caseloads, which, in the majority of teams, are now manageable.
- Social workers have been well supported during the pandemic. They have had access to managers to discuss casework, as well as regular check-ins to discuss their own welfare. Staff have had access to a variety of virtual training opportunities to promote their knowledge of the newly implemented social work approach. They have also been supported to stay safe through the provision of guidance, team and individual support, and the provision of personal protective equipment.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. It will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Amanda Maxwell
Her Majesty's Inspector