

19 October 2021

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Dear Lee-Anne

### **Monitoring visit to Medway children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Medway children's services on 14 and 15 September 2021. This was the second monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in August 2019. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Kate Malleon and Maire Atherton.

The local authority has made modest but fragile progress since the inspection in 2019, reflecting corporate and political commitment and ambition to improving services for children and young people. Leaders have a clear understanding about the areas of weakness and the relentless and continued focus that is required to address them.

### **Areas covered by the visit**

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- Senior managers' oversight and understanding of vulnerable children's experiences, including through the quality, accuracy and effectiveness of audits.
- Staffing capacity across children's social work teams.
- The quality, effectiveness and impact of social work practice for children in need and children who are subject to child protection plans or decisions to step down from plans.
- The response to risk for children who have experienced neglect, those exposed to parental domestic abuse and young people in danger of exploitation and who go missing from home.
- The effectiveness of management oversight and supervision in making sure that children are protected from harm and make progress.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

## **Headline findings**

During this monitoring visit, inspectors did not find any children whom they considered to be unsafe or left at immediate risk of harm. However, most children in Medway who require support are not yet receiving a good enough service. Their progress is held back by wide-ranging inconsistencies in the quality and impact of assessments, plans, interventions and management oversight and supervision. Despite leaders achieving improvements in the stability of the workforce, more recent staff turnover is threatening to undermine the fragile progress made. Capacity has also been tested by an increase in demand and in the complexity of children's needs during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

Nevertheless, there are some encouraging signs of progress in the help that children in need and children subject to child protection plans receive. The experienced and now permanently appointed leadership team is visibly determined to ensure that practice changes are embedded. Leaders are taking a measured approach to improvement, as they consider that this will ensure that changes are sustained. Audit arrangements have been strengthened by a process of moderation. They provide leaders with a more accurate measure of the impact of improvements and the remaining deficiencies. This helps to keep a keen focus on the critical areas for improvement. Staff report being well supported, including throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. They value the opportunities for learning, professional development and career progression which the local authority provides.

## **Findings and evaluation of progress**

Recent work shows some evidence of more purposeful planning. More effective safety and contingency planning is reducing the risk that children enter care unnecessarily in an emergency. More consistent use of family network meetings and family group conferences is helping parents to look within their own family and friend networks for support with parenting and to help them to safeguard their children.

The quality of assessments and reviews of plans remains inconsistent. Leaders have introduced a new model which has the potential to strengthen practice with children and families. Where staff are beginning to use this well, assessments identify risks and protective factors and are supported by plans with clear actions and timescales. However, in too many children's cases, assessments and plans are weak, too adult focused and do not provide a clear sense of children and their experiences. Use of this model is not yet embedded and there is much repetition in records, which risks obscuring new information. However, the model is helping some social workers to present their concerns to children and families more clearly and simply. This enables parents to better understand what needs to change in order to improve their children's lives.

Review meetings are well attended by partners. It is not evident that children are routinely invited, but some children do attend, and others benefit from having an advocate to represent their views.

Most social workers are able to establish positive relationships with the children and families with whom they work. Social workers know their children well, speak enthusiastically about them and most demonstrate a strong ambition to improve their lives. More recent use of direct work is helping social workers to obtain children's views and to better understand their experiences and circumstances to inform planning and intervention. However, children's experiences would be better understood and reflected if their own words were recorded.

A few social workers take creative approaches to building relationships with teenagers and are successful in establishing their trust. However, too often, staff are not proactive or persistent enough to engage reluctant young people. This undermines the impact of their work and sometimes leads to a desire to close cases even when risks remain. Trusted relationships need to be valued and protected in work with vulnerable teenagers. Children's cases should not close until the child has formed a trusted relationship with another professional in the network.

Children are usually visited at a frequency which meets their level of need. A minority of visits have a clear purpose and generally achieve the objective. Unannounced visits are used when necessary, so that the local authority can be assured that children are safe. Some social workers and family support workers roll up their sleeves and undertake practical tasks alongside children and families, to encourage them and to demonstrate how things could be different.

Work to improve outcomes and experiences for children who live in circumstances of chronic neglect remains underdeveloped. For some children, there is a lack of drive to effect change, even when concerns have been enduring. More decisive action, rather than stepping down to early help, is needed when parents are not able to work with social workers. The local authority has had a longstanding ambition to implement consistent use of a tool to enable practitioners to gather evidence and to measure the level of neglect. Despite mandatory and regularly available training about the tool, its use by partners making referrals and by social workers in direct work with families remains low.

Work to address the impact of domestic abuse on children needs to be strengthened, particularly as harm to children resulting from witnessing incidents of domestic abuse is likely to have been hidden during the period of the pandemic. There is a waiting list for women who want to attend the community support programme.

Work with children at risk of exploitation is also underdeveloped. In some instances, social workers are not doing enough to explore and understand the full extent of potential risks facing the child. There needs to be more professional curiosity around these children, for example, about how they are paying for the cannabis that they are smoking and whether this is bringing them into contact with negative influences or putting them at risk of further criminal activity. Risk assessments are not always updated when there is a change of circumstances for the family.

Despite the additional challenges presented by the pandemic, the local authority has maintained a determined approach to improvement. Previous investment and this year's top-up investment demonstrate corporate and member commitment and a strong focus thus far on improving outcomes for children in Medway. However, despite encouraging glimpses of early progress, there is still a very long way to go to ensure that all children consistently receive the help and protection that they need.

Leaders have accurately identified critical areas for improvement. The plan to address these areas tackles the right issues for children, although work focused on neglect and domestic abuse has made slow progress and has been hampered by the pandemic. In addition, some critical performance indicators have recently begun to worsen, such as the timeliness of visits to children and the timeliness of reviews and core groups. Although still within the local authority's desired targets, this slippage is nevertheless of concern and demonstrates an ongoing need to maintain a relentless and sustained focus on improvement activity.

Most staff have regular supervision and, in many cases, this provides clear direction that informs their work with families. Few supervision records show evidence of reflection and analysis, and actions set at supervision are not always achieved within the timescales set by managers. This causes delay in progressing the child's plan and improving their lives.

There is positive engagement by partners in the Medway Safeguarding Children Partnership. Local authority managers had already recognised that the police did not consistently engage in multi-agency planning and are taking appropriate action to resolve these concerns.

Recent turnover of staff threatens to undermine the tenuous progress made. The stability and experience of the workforce continue to be the most significant and stubborn challenges to Medway's improvement journey. Leaders have an appropriate focus on recruitment and retention. The targeted approach being taken to professional development and career progression is recognised and valued by staff. Practitioners at all levels report being well supported by accessible managers and colleagues, including throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. They feel listened to, value the engagement with leaders through the staff forum and appreciate the focus on well-being. All staff benefit from access to a range of relevant training and, importantly, this includes locum staff. Capacity issues have delayed professional development and training for team managers. In addition, staff turnover means that there is a need to retrain auditors. Both issues hinder progress.

Careful monitoring of workloads, together with investment, means that most social workers have caseloads within the local authority's target limit. However, caseloads have started to increase again and children and families' needs are increasingly complex.

Audit activity has been strengthened by the use of moderation and provides a clear picture of the very variable quality of practice. The audit tool could be simplified but audits are an effective means to develop staff.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Kate Malleon  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**