

1 March 2022

Dr Lee-Anne Farach  
Director of People  
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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 25 and 26 January 2022. This is the fourth visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in August 2019. Her Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Rachel Griffiths and Andy Waugh.

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

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

- Decision-making for children who come into care, including the effectiveness of pre-proceedings.
- Permanence planning for children in care, including all permanence options.
- Help and support for children in care in relation to all aspects of their health and well-being.
- The impact of leaders on practice, including quality assurance processes.

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

### **Headline findings**

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, the stable and committed senior leadership team has focused relentlessly on its improvement journey. Children's needs have continued to be prioritised throughout the lockdowns. As a result, steady progress has been made in relation to the experiences of children in care. The pace of change has accelerated over the last six months. Senior leaders have a good understanding of the strengths of their service as well as the areas that still require further improvement.

Social work practice remains inconsistent, meaning that not all children achieve permanence as quickly as they need. Leaders understand that there is more to do to develop services that support children with emotional health needs, so that all children in care in Medway receive consistently good and timely support to improve their life experiences.

### **Findings and evaluation of progress**

The pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline process has improved since the previous inspection but is not yet effective for all children. Tracking systems and increased legal and management oversight provide timescales for completing the work, which assists with more timely decision-making. This is reducing delay for some children. However, delays are yet to be eradicated for all children. Sometimes the step up to pre-proceedings is too slow, leaving some children waiting too long for their circumstances to improve.

Decisions for children coming into care are appropriate to safeguard them. However, too many children already known to children's services come into care in an emergency. The lack of earlier preparation and planning inevitably make it harder for children to settle into a new and different environment. Senior leaders have explored this and understand the reasons, and plans are in progress to address this.

Planning for permanence has improved since the previous inspection. New processes mean that all permanence options are considered for children, and social workers pursue a range of appropriate options simultaneously. Regular permanence planning meetings help to progress plans, particularly for some younger children with adoption plans. Consequently, more children have been matched with foster carers who are approved to adopt. Also, more children have been matched with adopters in the last 12 months than in previous years. Additionally, significantly more children in long-term foster care benefit from the certainty and security provided by being permanently matched with their carers.

While this is positive, delays remain for many children in securing permanence. Although the pandemic and a lack of court time have been the most significant factor in children's permanence plans being delayed, a range of other factors also contribute to this. Inspectors saw some delays between decisions for children to enter care and a court application being made. Inspectors also saw some poor social work assessments, changes of social worker and team managers, and a lack of management and independent reviewing officer (IRO) oversight. Senior leaders recognise that these delays cause uncertainty and instability for children. Concerted plans to improve the quality and consistency of practice and planning for children remain a work in progress.

Positively, social workers speak with passion and pride about the children they work with. They know them well and visit them regularly. IROs also visit children regularly

and review their circumstances at a midway point between reviews to develop insight into children's lives and gain their views.

Some strong direct work is being undertaken by social workers with children, including life-story work. However, too many children have experienced changes of social worker. This has impacted on relationship-building and leads to a delay in productive direct work being undertaken while new relationships are being forged.

Social workers routinely update children's assessments for their six-monthly reviews or if their circumstances significantly change in between. The quality of assessments is variable. Some are thorough, fully informed by children's voices, and include an analysis of how past experiences inform current needs and risks. Most, however, are too descriptive and lack analysis to inform plans. Children's plans are too often vague and some lack timescales, which contributes to drift.

Children's assessments and plans are lengthy and confusing for parents to read. They often contain jargon, making it difficult for families to understand the concerns, and what needs to change or who will be doing what to help children's lives improve. There are some examples of excellent work. For example, a social worker used simple words and pictures to help parents with learning difficulties properly understand the concerns and what they needed to do to improve their child's life.

Social workers receive regular supervision from their managers and they report feeling well supported by them. However, the quality of written supervision records varies. Better ones are reflective and have actions with timescales to achieve progress. But too many are largely descriptive and lack ambition and challenge to improve children's lives. This contributes to delay in progressing children's plans.

Most children in care have up-to-date health and dental checks. However, not all children get the right help at the right time to promote their mental health and emotional well-being. A range of pilots are underway to address this, it is too early to see any impact.

The majority of children in care live in stable, secure foster placements that meet their needs. However, due to sufficiency challenges, a significant minority of older children are living further away from Medway than leaders would like and in placements that do not fully meet children's needs. As a consequence, some children experience repeated moves and do not achieve the permanence that they need. Senior leaders fully understand the sufficiency challenges. Ambitious but realistic plans are underway to address this. Again, it is too soon to see the full impact of these plans.

Due to the sufficiency challenges, a very small number of children are living in unregistered placements. While more suitable permanent placements are being

identified, leaders maintain strong oversight of each child's circumstances to ensure that these children receive a high level of support from a range of professionals.

The corporate parenting board has been strengthened since the previous inspection. The board scrutinises performance data and actively challenges on behalf of children. Most significantly, children's voices are now being heard and listened to, to develop services and improve children's experiences. Bright and colourful newsletters and regular reports produced by an impressive Children in Care Council illustrate this. Children note the improvements made by leaders and have more confidence in their corporate parents. They report, 'We are so happy our voices are now being heard,' and, 'I feel like we will know the changes made as the actions will be fed back.'

With strong political and corporate support, a strengthened senior leadership team remains resolute in its commitment to improving the lives of children in Medway. The recently updated self-assessment demonstrates that leaders know their service. Ambitious and realistic improvement plans continue to have a positive impact on practice and services for children.

An embedded audit process with routine moderation is enabling senior leaders to have a clear and accurate understanding of the quality of practice in Medway. However, the electronic recording system introduced in April 2021 is not accurately reporting data, and is hindering senior leaders' ability to make informed decisions about practice areas. Leaders are in the process of embedding a wider quality assurance framework to promote learning and development in response to audit findings.

There has been progress since the previous inspection in addressing workforce stability, but challenges remain. Senior leaders rightly recognise that without workforce stability, consistent practice quality will be hard to achieve and sustain. As a result, the drive to attract, recruit and retain a skilled workforce continues.

Social workers spoke positively about working in Medway. They have felt supported throughout the pandemic. They have manageable caseloads. They value the practice model in place and the training they are offered to implement this. Workers also report that senior leaders are visible, available and ambitious for children. Social workers share this ambition and demonstrate passion to achieve improved outcomes for children.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Rachel Griffiths  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**