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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 21 and 22 September 2022. This was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in August 2019. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Rachel Griffiths and Joy Howick.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made to improve social care support for disabled children, with a focus on:

- Disabled children who are the subject of referrals and assessments.
- Disabled children who are the subjects of child in need and child protection plans.
- Disabled children in care and disabled children receiving a short-break service.
- Disabled children in care transitioning to adult services.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors were on site during this visit. They spoke with young people, parents and carers, social workers, managers and leaders. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children and young people's case records.

Headline findings

Following the previous ILACS inspection in 2019, senior leaders identified significant weaknesses in the 0–25 service for disabled children and young adults. This led to changes in the management arrangements for the service and the development of a detailed improvement plan. Some progress against this plan is evident, including an increase in staffing capacity, and a training programme to support workers to develop knowledge about child protection and court work, which has had a positive impact for some children. Progress has, however, been hampered by the COVID-19

pandemic, by challenges in recruiting social workers with the relevant broad skills required to work within this service, and by staff sickness.

Senior leaders know the 0–25 service well. The foundations for improvement are in place, specifically to address a lack of community resources for disabled children, recruitment and retention issues, complicated transitions processes and case management systems, and inconsistency in the quality of social work practice. Leaders are fully aware that they still have some way to go to deliver consistent quality social care support to all disabled children who need this in Medway.

Findings and evaluation of progress

When a new referral is accepted and transferred to the 0–25 service, social workers complete timely assessments. Children are seen promptly as part of this process. The quality and impact of these assessments are, however, variable. In stronger ones, there is evidence of multi-agency consultation and the views of children shine through. The graded care profile is used as a tool to consider potential concerns regarding neglect, and an analysis provides clarity about what help and support disabled children and their families need. Weaker assessments do not give broader consideration to the needs of the child and their brothers and sisters, and some lack professional curiosity and do not fully explore family history and family network support. The lack of a thorough assessment hinders the formulation of a plan that will best meet the child's needs.

Although assessments often identify support needs, a lack of community resources means that too many children have to wait too long for services, such as short breaks or personal adviser support, that will enrich their lives and ease pressures on families. Senior leaders are in the process of addressing this shortfall, but it is too soon to see an impact.

For children who are already receiving a community package of support, assessment and review of their needs have not been consistently taking place in a timely way to analyse whether children continue to receive the right level of support. Leaders have responded to this shortfall and are ensuring that social workers are systematically undertaking visits to children who have not been seen by a social worker for a long time. As a result, there is now better oversight of these children. This reduces the risk of children not receiving the support they need to improve their life experiences.

Social workers in the 0–25 service are committed to improving disabled children's lives. Some children, particularly those who have had the same social worker for a long time, have developed strong and positive relationships with their social workers. Creative direct work undertaken with some disabled children, including non-verbal children, is helping workers to understand what life is like for them. This is not consistent, though. A significant proportion of children experience changes in social worker, meaning that they, and their family, have to repeat their story to unfamiliar

people. Not only does this affect children's ability to form trusting relationships, it builds in delay to children's plans being progressed.

Child in need reviewing officers and child protection chairs review plans for disabled children regularly. The quality and impact of these plans vary. Stronger plans, based on more thorough assessments, are clear, with time-bound actions which help families and professionals measure the progress children make. Weaker plans lack timescales and clarity about who will do what and by when to help improve a child's life. This builds in delay. Contingencies are lacking in too many plans. As a consequence, parents do not have clarity about what a Plan B would look like if a resource is not available, or if their child's welfare does not improve.

When concerns for a disabled child's welfare escalate, timely child protection investigations help to establish whether children need to be subject to child protection plans. Strategy meetings, while making appropriate plans, do not always have the benefit of important health professionals contributing to multi-agency decision-making to better improve children's safety and experiences.

Most disabled children in care live in stable and settled placements with carers who meet their needs well. Again, as with disabled children in need, those children in care who have had a consistent social worker benefit from positive relationships with a trusted person they can share their aspirations and worries with. For other children in care who have experienced changes in worker, there have been delays in their permanence plan being completed and in important life-story work being undertaken to help them understand their journey into care.

Due to placement sufficiency challenges, some disabled children are living in placements further away from Medway than they, or their families, would like. A small minority of disabled children with the most complex needs are living in unregistered placements while more suitable alternatives are identified. Senior leadership oversight of these children is evident and providers are directed to apply for registration. Case recording of safety plans for a small number of children living in these circumstances is not sufficient to provide assurance that they are being kept as safe as possible.

The experiences of older disabled children transitioning to adult services are variable. Some older disabled children are well prepared in a timely way, with a smooth and well-planned transition to an adult placement. For other older disabled children, transition planning does not start soon enough, resulting in some not having certainty about their living arrangements as they approach adulthood. Overly complicated transition policies and procedures are time-consuming for social workers, taking them away from direct practice with children at a critical point in their lives. Some young people that inspectors met with from the Wednesday Squad, a support group for young people with additional needs, shared their recollections of their transitions in the past. Most reported that they did not feel well supported by a

consistent social worker or personal adviser, and that their views were not adequately heard.

The Wednesday Squad is a resource that is highly valued by young people. It is an inclusive and welcoming group that meets weekly. Young people unanimously praised the service, with one young person summing up the views of others by saying that 'It is a happy and safe place. We have fun. We make friends, and there is always someone here who we can share any worries with.'

Senior leaders maintain a determined approach to improvement. The local authority's recently updated and accurate self-assessment demonstrates how senior leaders know their strengths and what they need to do to address deficits in the 0–25 service. Feedback from representatives of the Medway parent and carers forum confirmed the deficits leaders are working on. The impact of the 0–25 improvement plan is not yet apparent to all parents, many of whom continue to struggle due to a lack of community resources and consistency of social workers in their lives.

The progression of the 0–25 improvement plan has been hampered by significant staffing shortages and sickness levels within the service. Managers have been unable to allocate all children open for a review to a named social worker, as is their aspiration. While it is positive that staffing capacity has increased, despite relentless efforts to recruit to additional posts, recruiting staff with the broad range of skills and experiences to work with both disabled children and young adults continues to be a challenge.

As a result of the staffing challenges, social workers report feeling very busy. Despite their work pressures, social workers are positive about working in Medway. They report that their colleagues, team managers and senior leaders are visible and supportive.

Some social workers receive regular supervision from their manager, which is reflective and helps them to learn and develop their practice as well as progress children's plans. Due to staff sickness at a team manager level, other social workers have not been receiving formal supervision as regularly as they should be. While senior management oversight and direction have mitigated the risk of the most complex disabled children's plans drifting, this is not a sufficient alternative to regular, quality, reflective supervision to help progress children's plans and improve their experiences.

The local authority's now well-established audit framework, with high-quality moderation, continues to enable senior leaders to have a clear and accurate understanding of the quality of practice across children's social care services, including with regard to disabled children. Work continues to embed learning and development in response to audit findings.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Rachel Griffiths
His Majesty's Inspector