

27 March 2023

Lee-Anne Farach  
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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 February 2023. This was the sixth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in August 2019. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Rachel Griffiths and Maire Atherton.

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

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in relation to the 'front door', with a particular focus on:

- Contacts and referrals and the quality and impact of work in the single point of access (SPA) and multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH).
- The front door responses to children who go missing and who are at risk of exploitation.
- The quality and impact of work in the assessment teams.
- The interface with early help 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 social workers, managers, leaders, and parents and carers. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

### **Headline findings**

Senior leaders remain relentless in their quest to improve the experiences of children and families in Medway. Since the previous ILACS inspection, Significant progress in respect of the quality and impact of front door services has been made.

The SPA/MASH provides an effective initial response to contacts and referrals. Families now receive mostly timely and responsive early help through the family

solutions service. This is a significant improvement since 2019. Increased capacity in both the family solutions and assessment services means that children and families are now receiving more timely help, support and protection. Children open to the assessment service are now seen within appropriate timescales. This ensures that their immediate safety needs are promptly assessed.

Despite this evident progress, significant challenges remain in relation to an increase in demand for front door services, and in relation to workforce stability across children's services. This has resulted in a recent increase in caseloads in the assessment teams (though still considerably lower than they were in 2019). This has impacted on the quality, consistency and timeliness of some assessments of children in need of statutory involvement.

Senior leaders have responded proactively to the workforce challenges. They are realistic about the change still required to embed workforce stability and improve the quality of social work practice so that this, in turn, consistently improves the lives and experiences of all children needing help, support and protection living in Medway.

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

Managers respond to contacts into the SPA in a timely way. Their oversight at the point of contact results in appropriate actions being initiated. Checks and actions requested are proportionate and relevant to the area of risk present.

In the MASH, the consideration of children's histories, embedded partnership working and effective information-sharing inform social work analysis and management decision-making. Social workers are thoughtful and curious when making recommendations to ensure that the next steps best meet the child's level of need. Management oversight of these recommendations is well recorded, clear and timely in order to protect and support children.

When contacts relate to children who have gone missing, the monitoring of these children is thorough, with daily reporting and management oversight of all incidents. Social workers and managers consider whether exploitation factors may be present. When they identify exploitation as a risk, this is usually responded to promptly to help reduce risk.

When social workers and managers have assessed contacts as not needing statutory intervention, but a support need has been identified for a child, many children benefit from this early help quickly. However, for a minority of children it takes too long for the intervention to start.

Once started, early help interventions are mostly effective and make a positive difference to children's lives. Sensitively tailored direct work with children enables practitioners to understand children's experiences. Early help intervention plans, with

clear targets and timescales that are regularly reviewed, help children and families see how their lives are improving.

When early help support is not improving children's experiences, children are appropriately stepped up to children's services. In instances where there are disagreements about a step-up decision, healthy professional challenge results in a resolution and timely progress and intervention at the right level.

Responses to immediate safeguarding concerns are timely. Children's cases quickly transfer to the assessment service. Promptly held strategy meetings enable some key professionals to share information to inform the next steps. Too many strategy meetings, however, do not benefit from the input from health professionals. This creates the risk of important information being missed and not shared to inform decisions. Minutes of strategy meetings result in appropriate, though not always timebound actions. Despite this, social workers visit children promptly to assess their immediate safeguarding needs following strategy meetings.

When strategy meetings result in child protection investigations, social workers make appropriate enquiries with family members and key professionals. The views and observations of children inform the outcome of the investigation. Initial child protection conferences that may follow are mostly timely and well attended by relevant professionals who contribute meaningfully to develop a safety plan.

In a minority of children's cases, when management oversight in the SPA/MASH determines that an urgent visit (rather than a strategy meeting) is required to inform next steps, these visits occur promptly. A lack of consistent management oversight following such visits, however, builds in a short delay in the right actions being progressed for these children.

When the threshold for a statutory assessment of children's needs is met, children are promptly allocated a social worker from the assessment team. The overview and guidance provided by the manager at the point of allocation mean that social workers know what they need to do and by when to progress the assessment.

Social workers tasked with undertaking assessments of children's needs mostly visit children within five days. Social workers quickly build relationships with children. Thoughtful direct work undertaken with some children helps social workers understand what children's lives are like. This informs assessments and planning. However, social workers told inspectors during the visit that the quality of direct work that they undertake with children is compromised by their current higher caseloads.

The quality of assessments is variable. Most include some consideration of a child's history and the views of children, parents and professionals involved. Some assessments are detailed and comprehensive. However, in others, social workers fail to fully consider or assess the views and role of non-resident parents in relation to the child's needs. Although social workers are aware of tools such as the graded care

profile to help them assess children impacted by neglect, they do not consistently use such tools to inform their assessments. As a result, social workers sometimes fail to fully analyse the underlying causes of the neglect in their assessments of children's needs.

Such shortfalls in the assessment then impact on the quality of initial child protection and child in need plans. Too many of these plans focus on shorter-term goals, rather than on what further assessments and interventions are required to achieve and maintain sustained improvements to children's lives. Additionally, initial plans do not routinely provide parents with clarity about what will happen if their children's lives do not improve.

Senior leaders are fully aware of the areas where practice needs to be more consistent. They understand how the recent increase in caseloads in the assessment teams has impacted on the quality and timeliness of assessments. Leaders have taken proactive actions in response to demand and workforce challenges. This has included recognising and rewarding the commitment of permanent staff and bringing in temporary additional capacity to address vacancies while recruitment drives continue. However, despite the best efforts of senior leaders, the workforce remains fragile. Senior leaders are acutely aware that a stable and skilled workforce is vital to further sustainable long-term improvements.

Despite currently having caseloads higher than both social workers and leaders would like, most staff told inspectors that they like working in Medway. While feeling very busy, social workers reported having supportive managers who help them to prioritise their work. There is a collective commitment to prioritising children's safety. Social workers feel valued and listened to. For example, leaders have taken action to improve assessment templates that were making social workers' roles more difficult.

The quality assurance framework, which includes regular audit and moderation activity, continues to provide senior leaders with a high level of insight into the quality of social work practice, and the impact this is having on children's lives. Quality assurance activities continue to inform senior leaders about where they need to focus their improvement priorities moving forward.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Rachel Griffiths  
**His Majesty's Inspector**