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2 June 2025

Lee-Anne Farach  
Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive  
Medway Council  
Gun Wharf  
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Dear Ms Farach

### **Focused visit to Medway local authority children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Medway local authority children's services on 29 and 30 April 2025. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Amanda Maxwell and Rodica Cobarzan.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need or children subject to a child protection plan.

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

### **Headline findings**

Senior leaders in Medway continue to focus on improving and developing how children in need or children subject to a child protection plan are supported. Since the inspection in 2023, when the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection were judged as requiring improvement, improvements have been made to arrangements for children who are 16 or 17 and at risk of homelessness. There is also a continued focus on developing and improving the response provided to disabled children and to adolescents at risk of exploitation. However, progress overall has been hindered by increased demands on the service, alongside turnover of more senior managers and challenges with the recruitment and retention of staff. The quality and impact of social work practice for children in need or children subject to child protection plans continue to be variable, with much not yet reaching the standard to which the local authority aspires. There have been some improvements made but these are fragile and are yet to be embedded.

### **What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?**

- The quality of assessment and planning.
- The timeliness of intervention, including during pre-proceedings, to support prompt decision-making and inform permanence planning.

- The quality and impact of management oversight and supervision to support children's experiences improving in a timely way.

## Main findings

There continues to be corporate and political commitment and ambition to improve services for children and young people. Leaders understand the strengths and weaknesses of their services well and their self-evaluation provides clarity regarding the quality of practice and the key areas for improvement and development.

However, some children in Medway who require help or protection are not yet receiving a consistently good enough service. Progress in practice is held back by wide-ranging inconsistencies in the quality and impact of assessments, plans, interventions, management oversight and supervision. Despite leaders achieving small improvements in the stability of the workforce, more recent staff turnover is threatening to undermine the fragile progress made to date.

The quality of assessments and plans remains variable, with the majority not yet good. Stronger work is thorough and exploratory and clearly defines what is needed to improve children's circumstances and situations in a timely way. Weaker work lacks clarity about current needs, risks and vulnerabilities; consequently, the assessments do not inform plans to ensure that families know what needs to happen to meet the children's needs or to protect them more effectively.

Senior leaders continue to focus on strengthening management oversight and supervision. There continues to be some variability in the quality and impact of this work. Stronger practice demonstrates the effective review of actions and work to address need, alongside evidence of reflective and challenging conversations that drive progress.

Children are seen regularly by their social workers, who know them well. Most visits provide opportunities for children to explore and share their experiences, hopes and worries. Some children are engaged in creative direct work which reflects their views, likes and dislikes about their circumstances; this is then used to inform future decision-making.

Review meetings and core groups are well attended by partner agencies, families and children. The wider network around children is engaged effectively in addressing need and supporting improvements in children's experiences.

Families and children access a wide variety of services in addition to direct work and interventions to meet their needs and to help them to make positive changes to their circumstances. These include one-to-one practical parenting support and family activities. Specialist services are helping adults to understand the impact of their

behaviours on their children. These services provide helpful support with issues such as domestic abuse, finances, housing, and alcohol and substance misuse.

Family group decision-making forums are regularly used to help families to identify and develop wider family network support plans. There has been positive change to children's experiences through these impactful meetings, at which the family network develops helpful support and contingencies to meet needs.

When concerns escalate, there is appropriate and timely action to investigate, explore and address concerns. Partner agencies are fully engaged in these discussions, which consider and inform next steps and the required actions to safeguard children. When children's situations deteriorate or do not improve within the child's time frame, other levels of intervention are explored.

Letters before proceedings are written in clear language that supports parents to understand the concerns that need to be addressed to avoid the need for court action. Effective monitoring systems are in place to review plans for children who are subject to the pre-proceedings part of the Public Law Outline. Some children and families benefit from the intervention and support provided within pre-proceedings and are diverted away from care proceedings as their home situations improve and become safer. However, most children currently experience a variety of delays within the wider system. Decisions and actions do not routinely happen at pace. Some delays are purposeful, for example when a parent is expecting a child, but the extended time does not necessarily take into account the context of the other children in the family and the impact that this delay has on them. This means that they may remain living in circumstances where they experience harm for longer.

A range of in-house and commissioned specialist assessments provide information about parenting capacity so that risks can be considered within wider care planning decisions. The in-house assessment team is a useful resource that contributes positively to the progression of children's plans. On some occasions, the completion of specialist assessments is delayed and this in turn causes delay for children, who have to wait longer to benefit from plans to meet their needs and safeguard them being progressed.

The work on responding to harm outside the home has been brought back into children's social work teams from the adolescent service. All staff have completed training to support them in how they engage and support children who may be at risk. Social workers are explorative and gain a good understanding of the issues and risks. The networks around children work collectively to address change and to support children to engage in beneficial activities.

Disabled children who meet the local authority's eligibility criteria are supported by the 0 to 18 children and young people with disabilities team. There is variability in the quality of practice, specifically assessments, plans and management oversight for these children. Structural changes have been made to this part of the service since the inspection of 2023. Management capacity has been increased and the service

now only supports children aged 0 to 18. It is too soon to assess the impact of these changes; however, the quality of practice in this area is still not consistently good.

Since the inspection in 2023 there has been positive and impactful focus on the response to children aged 16 or 17 who are homeless. Joint working arrangements with housing have been strengthened. Children are provided with clear information about their rights and entitlements and this supports them in making a decision about their options. All children have access to advocacy, which supports them through the assessment process. The children benefit from being provided with practical help, advice and support.

Audit arrangements are strengthened by the involvement and feedback of social workers, families and children, alongside each audit being moderated. This helps to provide leaders with a more accurate measure of the quality of practice and the improvements needed to address weaknesses.

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 and barriers to progress. This has meant that some social workers have higher caseloads than senior leaders would like and these higher workloads are contributing to the variability in the quality of practice. Leaders have an appropriate focus on recruitment and retention in an attempt to address this. They have had some success with this, although progress has been slow.

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. All staff benefit from access to a range of relevant training. They value the opportunities for learning, professional development and career progression which the local authority provides.

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

Yours sincerely

Amanda Maxwell  
**His Majesty's Inspector**