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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 25 and 26 November 2025. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Michael Taylor and Jenny-Ellen Scotland.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in care. Specifically, they considered the quality of matching, placement and decision-making for children in care. Inspectors also looked at arrangements for children in care at risk from child sexual/criminal exploitation, the response to children missing from care, and the experiences and progress of children living in unregistered provision.

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 demonstrate a strong commitment to improving services for children in care. Children benefit from trusting relationships with their social workers, who know them well. Children enter care at the right time and decision-making is timely and appropriate. Most children live in stable homes which meet their needs. Oversight by independent reviewing officers (IROs) is strong. There is an ongoing successful focus on the number and range of homes available for children. This has helped limit the use of unregistered children's homes. The local authority has strengthened its response to tackling the risks to children from going missing and exploitation, and this is having a positive impact. Leaders have taken purposeful steps in building a more positive and skilled workforce; staff turnover has reduced and there is now a much higher percentage of permanent staff. The quality of care planning remains variable and consequently some children's needs are not always addressed well enough or soon enough. The use of tools to assess the risk to children from going missing or exploitation is not consistently embedded and risk assessments are not always robust. Although social workers say

they are supported well by their managers, the quality of supervision records is variable, with some lacking reflection about practice. These areas for improvement are known by leaders and action is underway to address them.

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

- The consistency with which the needs of children placed outside the local authority area are met, particularly in relation to education, and emotional and mental health. (Outcome 4 National Social Care Framework)
- How consistently the risk assessment tool is applied to support the quality and impact of work with children who go missing or at risk of exploitation. (Outcome 3 National Social Care Framework)

Main findings

The corporate, political and children services senior leadership in Medway are well aligned, visible and focused on continually improving services for children in care. This is delivering steady progress in the quality and impact of services for children in care. Leaders know both the strengths and areas which need to improve in their services for children. There is a strong learning culture in the service which benefits practitioners. Efforts to strengthen the permanent workforce are having a positive impact, contributing to greater consistency and improved practice.

Children in care benefit from strong, trusting relationships with their social workers, who know them well and who advocate effectively on their behalf. Social workers, who have manageable caseloads, invest time in developing these relationships and undertake direct work that supports children to understand their family histories and the reasons for being in care.

Visits to children are child centred, with records written in warm, age-appropriate language that clearly reflect the child's voice. They capture children's circumstances accurately, including their worries and strengths, and consequently plans are well targeted and responsive to individual needs. Most visits are completed within timescales that match children's individual circumstances and are increased promptly when children's needs escalate.

Children come into care at the right time, when it is necessary and in their best interests. There is effective management oversight of these decisions. Careful consideration and planning about children moving into care is helping them to settle well in homes that are well matched to their needs and where they can remain for as long as they need, often as their permanent homes. When concerns arise and/or children's living arrangements are at risk, immediate support is offered to strengthen arrangements and prevent breakdown. Care proceedings are initiated when this is what is needed to keep children safe. Managers track the progress of proceedings

closely to prevent delay. Decision-making consistently reflects children's needs and best interests.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, referred to as refugee children in Medway, receive very effective tailored support. They live in suitable homes where their health, education and cultural needs are met well. Risks of trafficking and exploitation are carefully considered and assessed, with well-targeted safety plans in place to reduce risks. Children are supported with their asylum claims and extended family links pursued, when this is in children's best interests.

Senior leaders are aware that the timeliness of initial health assessments (IHAs) is poor, and they are working with health partner agencies to improve this. However, children's general physical and emotional health care needs are understood and typically well met.

Children are generally supported to access education. However, for some children with additional needs, or who experience other barriers to education, their needs are not assessed or addressed early enough. Assessments for additional support for these children are too often delayed until secondary school. As a result, some children have not been able to transfer successfully from primary to secondary education.

Oversight from IROs is a particular strength due to the high quality, and often personalised nature, of the support and direction they provide. They stay in regular touch with children and visit them often. Children speak about how they really value these visits and the long-lasting relationships they have with their IROs.

When used, the exploitation and missing from care toolkit is a helpful resource which supports social workers to identify actual and potential harm. It then leads to clear and purposeful interventions and plans which ensure children's needs and risks are identified and addressed. However, for a significant minority of children, this tool is not currently being used, and this limits social workers understanding of risk and ability to intervene as effectively as they could.

Children are supported to understand the risks associated with going missing from care. All children are routinely offered a return home interview after they have been missing. The local authority has provided additional resources to ensure that return home interviews are offered to all children, including those who live outside the local area. Strong partnership working with the police ensures that intelligence from these interviews is used well to understand the reasons children go missing and reduce the likelihood of it happening again. However, risk assessments, safety plans and referral to the 'Missing and Exploitation Discussions' are not routinely completed. This means that not all children are benefiting from the most coordinated and effective response.

There has been a clear and sustained commitment to avoiding the use of unregistered placements. When unregistered placements are used, social workers visit children at least weekly, and this is alongside robust management oversight and comprehensive quality assurance processes. Line managers and IROs also provide weekly oversight.

The local authority has made a significant investment in increasing the number of children's homes it operates itself. This, alongside its wider approach to increasing the sufficiency of children's homes available is making a positive difference for Medway children. These measures reduce the likelihood of the local authority having to rely on the use of unregistered homes or to place children a long distance away. There are, however, a small minority of children living at a distance from the local authority who do not get all their needs well met due to a lack of access to some services, including specialist health care.

The quality assurance processes are mostly effective in identifying strengths and weaknesses in practice, with recommendations and actions arising from audits being addressed in subsequent supervision sessions. It also enables senior leaders to have a clear line of sight to practice and an accurate understanding of strengths and areas for improvement. However, the process does not currently benefit from gaining consistent feedback from children, families and carers.

There is a strong learning culture in Medway and social workers say that they feel supported in their professional development. They can attend relevant training and are supported to embed learning into practice. The 'children in care NQSW' team provides a positive environment for newly qualified social workers, balancing support from experienced staff with opportunities to learn collaboratively. Supervision occurs regularly. However, there is variability in the quality and effectiveness of this. In weaker examples, there was a lack of evidence of reflective discussions. Senior leaders have already identified that this is an area for ongoing improvement.

Social workers in Medway report strong job satisfaction and high morale. They told inspectors that they value the support provided by their managers and that their knowledge and experience is recognised.

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

Yours sincerely

Michael Taylor
His Majesty's Inspector