

## **Commissioner's update for the Minister for Children and Families on progress in Medway**

### **Introduction**

This report provides an update on progress in improving children's services in Medway. It has been drafted to support the discussion with the DfE and the Council at the quarterly review meeting on the 14th December 2020. It has been updated following the meeting to include the conclusions reached, and agreement on the priorities for the next 6 months.

The Ofsted inspection of children's services in July 2019, judged the effectiveness of children's services in Medway to be inadequate. The judgements for the impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families, and the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection were inadequate. The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers was judged requires improvement to be good.

As this was the second overall inadequate judgement within a 5-year period, the Secretary of State for Education issued a Statutory Direction which included the appointment of myself in September 2020 as Children's Services Commissioner to undertake a review. I completed the review in December 2019. The key issues I identified were summarised as follows:

- Council officers and the, political leadership have failed to create an environment in which good social work can be delivered. They have not ensured that the Council and its partners work coherently and collaboratively together to consistently deliver good outcomes for the most vulnerable children and young people.
- The Council needs to use the lessons from the range of reviews it has commissioned, and from inspections, to put in place clear, co-ordinated plans which will deliver real change.
- Despite similar geographical arrangements there has not been effective joint working between children's social care and early help and with the community hubs. It is likely that the instability in key management posts has been a contributory factor.
- During 2018/19, inspections and reviews all raised concerns about the quality of practice of long-term work, and the underlying problems that needed to be addressed which were still issues at the time of the July inspection. There have been too many changes and lack of permanence in the senior and middle management group.
- Members in key executive roles must ensure that the needs of children are

championed, and underpin actions to improve children's social care. The role of scrutiny needs to be strengthened, and more training for the wider group of members on children's issues and their role as ward councillors.

- Recruitment and retention are a constant pressure which needs to be helped by a clearer vision and direction, and by creating an environment which supports staff to do a good job.
- The Improvement Board must ensure that there is a co-ordinated approach to improvement, and that there is sufficient pace in delivering change.

*I concluded "Medway knows what needs to change but there remain significant doubts about pace and drive to deliver real improvements in the timescale that is required. Whilst there has been action to address individual issues, this has been too piecemeal. If the Council are to retain operational control of children's services, they will need to prioritise politically, financially and managerially to deliver on its commitment to improvement. The Children and Young People's plan and the Improvement Plan must be explicit in terms of action and delivery. Given the history, effort and assurance will be needed to prevent short term improvement not being sustained, as has happened before."*

### **Progress from December 2019 to April 2020**

A comprehensive package of support was put in place to assist the Council. Bracknell Forest were appointed by the DfE to be Medway's leadership partner, to work with the political and officer leadership. Essex were appointed to provide Partner in Practice (PiP) support to assist with improvements to the quality of practice.

Medway were due to have their first Ofsted Monitoring Visit (MV) in March 2020. However, the visit was cancelled by Ofsted due to the national lockdown in response to Covid-19. In the absence of the anticipated positive assurance by Ofsted that progress was being made, I completed a detailed progress report at the end of April 2020 which also took account of the impact of Covid-19 on the Council and on the improvement journey. In my report I noted that the Council had succeeded in making progress during the previous few months despite the considerable challenge of responding to the Covid-19 crisis. Indeed, some benefits were seen, namely improved multi-agency working and the opportunity to review and risk assess all open cases.

There were some unforeseen issues which impacted on Bracknell Forest's ability to progress their work but to compensate for this, I worked with the Council and the Improvement Board chair to continue to address the leadership challenges. The Council leadership had begun to be much more explicit and proactive about its commitment to children. I concluded in April that there remained real and significant challenges, but a collective ambition to address those.

A formal review of progress was held in July 2020 and following that I submitted my 6-month update. At that time, I noted that given progress to date, I was optimistic that the challenges would continue to be effectively responded to, and improvements would continue to be made. The Ofsted monitoring visit in August was expected to be

a timely over-view of the quality of practice and how the work that had been done to date had impacted on the experiences of children and their families.

The Priorities agreed at the July meeting for the following 3-6 months were:

1. Getting recruitment and retention right, and reducing agency numbers
2. Much more engagement of partners, and commitment to strategic actions, building on the bi-lateral working with police and health
3. Taking forward the corporate initiative of developing a child friendly Medway
4. Developing the wider member awareness and effectiveness
5. Managing recovery, and preparing for another Covid spike, dealing with the financial pressures, and impact of health re-structuring.
6. Continuing the relentless focus on practice

### **Progress since July 2020**

I have continued to meet monthly with the Leader, lead member, Chief Executive and DCS to review progress particularly relating to addressing the leadership challenges. I have also attended the Improvement Board, met weekly with the DCS, and less frequently with the AD and other managers in the service. I have attended the regular DfE led REACT meeting and the weekly meeting with Head Teacher representatives and observed first hand their collective endeavours with officers from across the Council, to manage the challenges presented in responding to Covid. During this period, I have also observed scrutiny committee and the corporate parenting panel, and attended the corporate management team and the first meeting of the Child Friendly Medway Board.

Ofsted carried out their first Monitoring Visit in August 2020. The inspectors found that the local authority has made initial progress in improving services for its children and young people. They recognised the targeted investment in the service and noted that a well-planned realignment of the teams had laid the foundations for practice to change and improve, and were beginning to have a positive effect.

A number of areas for ongoing improvement were identified, including recruitment and retention of social workers, but it was positive to hear that there were no children who were considered by inspectors to be at risk of harm.

Ofsted have not indicated when the next Monitoring Visit will be, but a Covid Assurance visit is likely to take place early in 2021. This will be to check the extent to which the authority has continued to provide services to support and safeguard children and families and carry out their statutory duties during the Covid restrictions.

The independent chair of the Improvement Board, Rory Patterson has provided a very detailed quarterly update. His report should be read alongside this update. I agree with his analysis and comments and will not repeat what he has covered. Rory's conclusion is that : *The Council and its partners have continued to make good progress, despite the ongoing challenges to partnership working presented by the*

*pandemic restrictions. Partnerships are sound and improving. Of particular note is the establishment of the Child-Friendly Medway Partnership Board under the leadership of the Chief Executive. This should help drive through further improvements in strategic working across Medway.*

Progress has been made in respect of all the priorities agreed in July:

1. Getting recruitment and retention right, and reducing agency numbers

The relentless drive on recruitment and retention has been very successful. The majority of managers at all levels are now permanent and there has been a significant improvement in the social worker vacancy rate to 23% in October compared to 40% in April 2020. This has made a positive difference to staff confidence and morale.

The staffing picture has been helped by the arrival in September of 10 social workers from Zimbabwe and South Africa, who have been well supported by Medway to settle in. The appointment of a new Principal Social Worker has been important bringing a real and welcomed increase in training and professional development.

2. Much more engagement of partners, and commitment to strategic actions

The DCS has built stronger bi-lateral working arrangements with police and health and has been supported by Rory to strengthen partnership involvement, following a brief review by Bracknell Forest. The work with schools during Covid has been impressive and effective in resolving a whole range of issues relating not just to dealing with the concerns raised by the pandemic, but wider education matters.

3. Taking forward the corporate initiative of developing a child friendly Medway

The first meeting of the Board, chaired by the Chief Executive has been held with strong commitment from partners to support this. It is obviously only the beginning of establishing how the Board will drive this forward but encouraging that the Council is fully determined to support this initiative.

4. Developing the wider member awareness and effectiveness

As I have noted previously the Council has added over £7m to the base budget for children's services and has demonstrated its stronger commitment to improving outcomes for children and young people. The appointment of the two permanent Assistant Directors for social care and education has brought stability and drive. A training programme has been developed to improve the functioning of the Scrutiny Committee and the corporate parenting panel. Members have welcomed the training and been positive about the increased understanding it has given them about the issues and their roles. I have witnessed the benefits in increased interest and more relevant questioning and oversight.

I think however both forums could be more effective. This will be especially important longer term when there is no longer an Improvement Board in place to provide that assurance, monitoring and challenge. Medway's children's services were previously in intervention and subsequently, having come out of intervention, failed to sustain the improvements that were made. No-one wants this to happen again. Both scrutiny

and corporate parenting are important Council functions that should ultimately provide that over-sight and challenge.

The training that has taken place is a good start. Further work is needed over the coming months to help move this forward. The Scrutiny committee continues to be overly bureaucratic in the way it operates and members do not always focus on the key questions raised by the information they receive.

Similarly, there is still work to do to strengthen the functioning and role of the Corporate Parenting panel. I have previously suggested that if it was a committee of the Council this might help, but there may be other ways to improve how it functions.

#### 5. Managing recovery, and preparing for another Covid spike, dealing with the financial pressures, and impact of health re-structuring

Since July, Medway, like other Local Authorities, has been greatly affected by the impact of Covid-19. Children's services have responded to the ongoing challenges, maintaining their focus on identifying and supporting the most vulnerable children. They have worked hard and effectively with schools to maintain the attendance of children known to the service. In September when schools re-opened, the anticipated rise in referrals did not happen. Early help staff have liaised closely with schools and offered support where needed.

Managers have sought to support staff with managing the personal and professional pressures resulting from the pandemic. In light of the current C-19 lockdown, have re-introduced risk assessments for children and will carefully monitor staff wellbeing. Whilst staff continue to work hard, many are reporting finding this second period of lockdown much more difficult and wearing. Delays in court proceedings has also had an impact.

The Council has retained its financial support for children's services. A good example of this is the initiative to secure 6 electric cars for the use of the service and particularly to support the international social workers to be able to visit families.

#### 6. Continuing the relentless focus on practice

This is fully covered in Rory's report.

All these areas outlined above will require ongoing focus and attention in the year ahead.

### **Views of staff and managers**

The DfE case lead, Ify Okoye, and I met with a group of social workers, and a group of front-line managers from across the service to hear their views directly. Whilst it was clear that Covid-19 continues to create challenges, there were many positive views expressed about the improvements being made, the significant increase in training and strong partnership working particularly with police and schools.

*“Medway has done well during Covid”* SW

*“We were able to focus on the children who really needed us”* SW

*“Clearer vision for recruitment and retention”* TM

*“previously was like talking to a brick wall about permanence, now if you raise an issue it will be actioned”* TM

## **Conclusion**

Since the DfE review in July, children’s services in Medway have worked hard to respond to Covid-19 and at the same time to drive forward the improvement plan. The conclusions from Ofsted in August, and the reflections from the chair of the Improvement Board align with my own views. There is much still to do, however, we are beginning to see progress, both strategically and in the quality of service. The pace of improvement has been measured, but sustained, with many hurdles overcome along the way. Senior officers and politicians deserve a lot of credit for achieving this during such difficult and challenging months.

I have been the Children’s Services Commissioner in Medway since September 2019 following the inadequate judgement by Ofsted. In writing this report, I have reflected on the key issues that I identified in my report in December 2019. As I’ve said here, I recognise that the Council has worked hard to address these issues and continues to do so. The Improvement Plan is appropriately ambitious and will be a key driver to ensure that this time Medway services do not fall back. The developing wider vision and aspiration for all children and young people in Medway should ensure that social care operates in a much more proactive and supportive environment for all children.

The leadership is much stronger and clearer, both politically and operationally. This is a good indication that the trajectory of improvement is likely to continue and be sustained longer term. Given this, it is my view that there is no longer a need for a Commissioner to be in place. In addition, there is no longer any need to consider an Alternative Delivery Model as Medway have demonstrated that they now have the capacity and capability to deliver the changes needed.

As Rory has outlined in his report, the focus on improving the quality of practice needs to continue. The appointment of an Improvement Advisor to provide additional ongoing support and challenge will be important for Medway, and to give assurance to the DfE.

The key tasks for the Improvement Advisor are likely to include:

- Challenges and supports DCS and ADs through regular 1-1 and other meetings.
- Advises on Improvement Plan and priorities for action.
- Directs what needs to change and works with individuals and groups to support the changes.
- Attends the Improvement Board
- Analyses performance data and audit reports and advises on action needed.

- Meets with front line and middle managers to support, influence, advise and to listen to their perspective. Uses that information to push leaders forward.
- Meets with front line staff to hear from them how things need to change, and are improving.
- Attends strategic forums to be informed of what is happening and to advise on current issues, good practice and national exemplars
- Writes reports and updates for DFE.
- Advises on improvements needed to scrutiny and corporate parenting committees and works with members to address shortfalls.
- May look at cases files, be part of practice week, undertake deep dives.
- Promotes creativity and best practice at all times.
- Assists the Council and its partners to develop its response to new crisis and challenges.

### **Recommendations to the Minister**

1. Bring to an end the role of Commissioner in Medway.
2. Confirm that an Alternative Delivery Model is no longer being considered
3. Appoint an Improvement Advisor to fulfil the tasks outlined above

### **Priorities for the next 6 months**

1. Deliver on the actions in the Improvement Plan.
2. Ensure the Council and its partners continue to drive and sustain improvements to practice
3. Improve the effectiveness of the Scrutiny Committee and Corporate Parenting Panel.
4. Continue to monitor and respond to the impact of Covid-19 on staff and practice
5. Develop the work of the Child Friendly Medway Board to deliver on the ambition for children in Medway
6. Maintain the focus on recruitment and retention
7. Maintain the focus of senior leaders and members on service improvement
8. Further develop QA activity
9. Strengthen commissioning arrangements
10. Improve the way in the which the voice of children and young people is heard and influences service improvement

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