

Report on ways forward for Children's Services in Medway

**Report for the Minister of State for
Children and Families by Eleanor Brazil,
Commissioner for Children's Social Care
in Medway**

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Executive summary

This report covers a period of 3 months following an Ofsted inspection of children's services in July 2019, which judged overall 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 as Children's Services Commissioner to undertake a review. The review has assessed the direction of travel of the authority since the recent judgement, including consideration of what if any additional support may be required to secure the necessary improvements. The report must also consider the need for any form of Alternative Delivery Model (ADM) in line with the "presumption test" about whether an authority with repeat Inadequate judgements can safely retain operational control of its children's services.

The report covers the context in which children's services operate, the Council's ambitions for children, current political and officer leadership. Medway has been the subject of inspections and commissioned several reviews, particularly in the past two years, which have provided considerable detail on the issues and challenges.

The Council Plan and the newly developed Children and Young People Plan describe the Council's ambition for Medway as a place that is growing and developing. The aspirations for the place are clear to see, but there needs to be a clearer link to how this makes a real difference to children and young people and why that is important for Council leaders. These plans are important as indicators of commitment to improvement and change but given the concerns around delivery and pace that are outlined further in this report, the Council needs to be more explicit and ambitious in terms of delivery.

Medway was previously judged inadequate by Ofsted in 2013, following 2 separate inspections, covering firstly the arrangements for the protection of children and secondly looked after children's services. In 2015 Ofsted noted improvements in practice across the service since 2013 but also areas where more progress was needed. Many of the practice issues that were requiring improvement in 2015, were the same issues in 2019.

Since 2015 there has been a series of changes in front-line, middle and senior management in children's services with too many posts covered for long periods of time by interim or acting up arrangements. Recruitment has been a longstanding challenge but is not the only reason for this. Since the beginning of 2018, there have been a number of reviews and inspections, some initiated by the Council, some externally imposed. Responding to all the areas identified is likely to have been a challenge for the

service, particularly given the changes and level of impermanence in the senior and middle management group.

Senior leaders should have ensured that the messages from each review or inspection were fully considered not just individually but in terms of their inter-relationship. The work this year to develop the new CYP plan should have been the opportunity to bring these issues together, to agree priorities and actions that would start to make a real and co-ordinated difference. Without an action and delivery plan this will not happen.

The inspection in July identified a range of concerns about the quality of practice. Social workers holding high numbers of cases was one factor, with some social workers holding in excess of 40 cases. This had also been highlighted in a previous joint targeted area inspection and an Ofsted focussed visit the previous year. The Medway POD arrangement of small teams of social workers with one practice manager covering all work on Children in Need, Child Protection and for Children in Care, has made it difficult for staff to prioritise effectively and spend sufficient time on direct intervention with children and their families.

Early help is delivered from four child and family hubs and needs to be better linked to children's social care. There is limited proactive strategic leadership by the Council, with its key partners in health, police and education to drive forward changes to how the system, as a whole, supports vulnerable children in areas such as early help. The lack of a clear early help strategy has been highlighted in inspections since 2015.

Medway schools and academies are critical of the Council's historic lack of support for, and work with schools, though they have recently seen some positive change in this. Schools and academies are key partners in supporting children's social care efforts to improve outcomes for vulnerable children, and these relationships must be strengthened and sustained.

The Council has agreed to recruit to the posts of Assistant Director Social Care and Assistant Director Education. Both posts are currently covered by experienced interims. Successful recruitment to these posts will be an important factor in not just helping drive the improvements needed, but in ensuring that any positive change is not just short term but sustainable.

The Council has been open to securing support and advice and this needs to continue in a more formal agreement. Discussions have taken place with a small number of good or outstanding local authorities, and the outcome of those is reflected in the recommendations. In my view, the Council's senior leaders also need help to make best use of such support. If they do this, there may not be a need to consider an alternative delivery model but I recommend a further review after 6 months to confirm this is the case.

1. Introduction

I was appointed by the Secretary of State for Education as Children's Services Commissioner on 27th August 2019, as part of the Statutory Direction to Medway Council in relation to children's social care. In undertaking this review, I have looked specifically at what went wrong, the steps taken by the Council to deal with the concerns, the impact this has had, and whether this has been sufficient to give confidence in the Council's capacity and capability to make improvements rapidly and, equally importantly, sustain these improvements long term.

The Council has been extremely welcoming and co-operative, and has sought to provide full support to enable me to undertake this task. I am very grateful for this.

2. Terms of reference

The Direction states that the Secretary of State has carefully considered Ofsted's report of the inspection that was carried out between 15 July and 26 July 2019. The inspection report found that overall effectiveness in relation to children's services was 'inadequate'. The sub-judgements for children who need help and protection and the impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families were both inadequate. The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers was judged requires improvement to be good.

The Direction appointed me as Commissioner, requiring me:

- a) To issue any necessary instructions to the local authority for the purpose of securing immediate improvement in the authority's delivery of children's social care; to identify ongoing improvement requirements; and to recommend any additional support required to deliver those improvements.
- b) To bring together evidence to assess the Council's capacity and capability to improve itself, in a reasonable timeframe, and recommend whether or not this evidence is sufficiently strong to suggest that long-term sustainable improvement to children's social care can be achieved should operational service control continue to remain with the council.
- c) To advise on relevant alternative delivery and governance arrangements for children's social care, outside of the operational control of the local authority, taking account of local circumstances and the views of the council and key partners.
- d) To report to the Minister of State for Children and Families by 1 December 2019.

3. Process

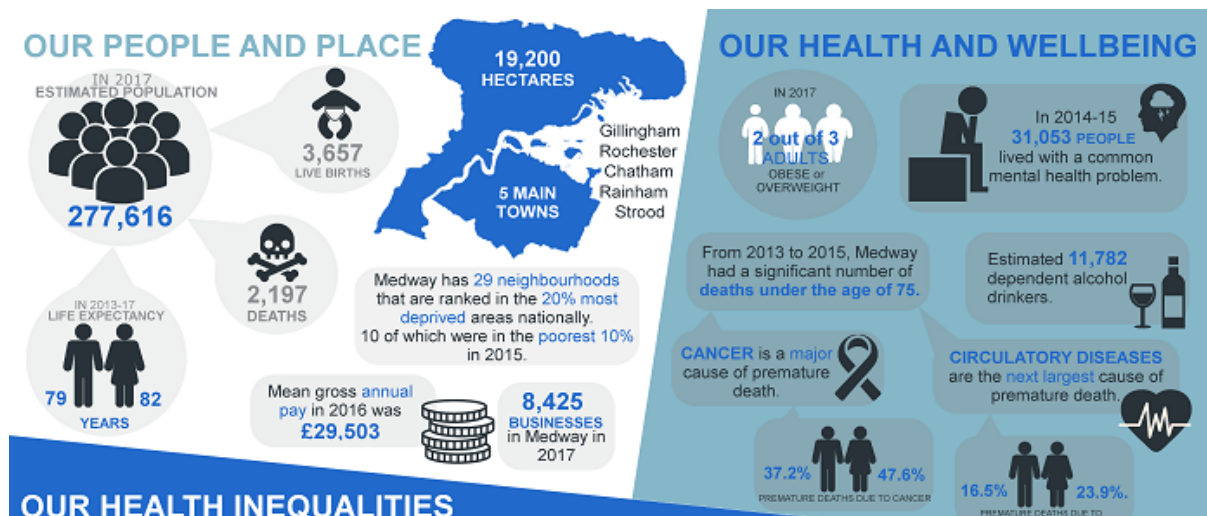
In the 3 months leading up to delivery of this report I have sought, as far as possible, to use existing forums and observation of practice, not to put additional pressure on the service to attend meetings or gather information that they would not otherwise be doing. I have reviewed available relevant background information, as well as more current information presented to the Children Services Improvement Board and to other key Council and multi-agency fora.

During this period, I have met frequently with the political and officer leadership of the Council. I have worked with the Director of People – Children and Adult Services and the interim Assistant Directors, to support them with planned and developing improvement activity, to identify any additional areas for improvement and development and to advise them on how best to address those.

In addition, I have met with staff groups, visited front line services and met with key partners to discuss the issues from their perspectives and to support them with their role in improving practice.

4. Context

The Council’s Joint Strategic Needs Assessment contains summaries of key information about Medway including the diagram below:



Medway Unitary Authority (“Medway”) was formed in 1998 and consists of five main towns (Strood, Rochester, Chatham, Gillingham, and Rainham) and a number of smaller towns and villages, now contained within 22 electoral wards. The built areas of the main towns have expanded over time and in places there is little demarcation between the end of one town and the beginning of another. The distance from the centre of one of these main towns to the next is between one and two miles.

While the towns are densely populated there are larger, much more sparsely populated rural areas in the Hoo Peninsula to the north of Medway, and the ward of Cuxton and Halling in the west.

Medway has a larger proportion between the ages of 0 and 14 years than England (19.7% and 18.1% respectively) and between the ages of 15 and 24 years (9.4% and 9.2% respectively). Approximately 65,000 children and young people under 18 years old live in Medway. According to the JSNA, the last five years have seen an increasing number of children and young people requiring additional support. This has had a significant impact on services at all levels — universal, targeted and specialist.

Council plan 2019-2020

The Council’s 3 priorities are:

Medway: A place to be proud of
Maximising regeneration and economic growth
Supporting Medway’s people to realise their potential

The Council plan is extremely ambitious for Medway as a place for economic development, growth and excellence. This is captured in the introduction, and makes clear links to the direct benefits for children and young people stating: “We want to

ensure that children have the best start in life and that our young people are provided with opportunities for a successful future.

Medway has become a centre of educational excellence. We are delighted to be the home of four universities and 12,000 students. There are also two colleges and our own Medway Adult Education centres which provide further opportunities for those looking to learn new skills and gain more qualifications. Medway also has a variety of schools across its five towns, providing an excellent choice to ensure each child's needs are met.

The population is growing and we have responded to this by investing tens of millions of pounds in Medway's schools and providing more school places. Since 2013, more than 3,000 additional primary school places have been added through new schools and expansions, and we are working on plans to open up new schools across Medway, including a secondary school for children with special educational needs and disabilities."

The clear ambition for Medway, the place, is captured in the plan. There are specific objectives relating to children, focussed on developing Children's Services to be a 'Good' service, continuing to strengthen the Early Help offer, supporting families to give their children the best start in life by developing an integrated approach to healthy child and early years programmes, and ensure all children achieve their potential in schools.

The C&YP plan 2019-2021 has been consulted on and received Council agreement in November. It states in the plan that the priorities and key indicators were chosen *'because they are a powerful focus for us as a Council as well as our partners. Rapid progress on these will have a knock-on effect in other areas, helping us go further and faster on our improvement journey'*.

We want all children in Medway to:

- *Thrive in their community
- * Empower families to be resilient and economically secure
- * Protect those at risk of harm
- *Have fun growing up and have a voice
- * Have a healthy start
- * Promote health and wellbeing through positive choices
- * Improve social, emotional and mental health and resilience
- * Reduce health inequalities
- * Be learning well
- * Ensure children have access to good provision
- * Raise achievement and progress for all
- * Equip young people for life and work in a strong Medway economy
- * Focused help to where it is needed earlier

This plan does make explicit statements of intent in respect of more detailed and wider priorities than the Council plan but does not yet have an action plan committing to delivery. It is not possible therefore to judge how quickly and effectively these priorities will be acted on to make a real difference.

Other key Strategies include Medway Council's Looked After Children Strategy 2015-2018 and Medway Council's SEND and Inclusion Strategy 2016 - 2020 both of which map ambitions and intended action to support transition and ensure readiness for work for more vulnerable young people.

The aspirations for Medway as a place are evident, but there needs to be a clearer link to how this makes a real difference to children and young people and why that is important for Council leaders. Plans are important as indicators of commitment to improvement on change but given the concerns around delivery and pace that are outlined further in this report, the Council needs to be more explicit and ambitious in terms of delivery.

5. Leadership

Political Leadership

The Council is made up of 55 councillors who represent 22 wards. The current political make-up of the council is: 32 Conservative, 20 Labour and Co-operative, 2 Independent and 1 Independent Conservative.

The current Leader has been the Leader since 2015, and was previously the deputy leader for 15 years, with the responsibility for the finance portfolio. As Leader, he retains this responsibility. The previous lead member for children's services did not stand for re-election in the May elections this year. He also chaired Medway Commercial Group, which was providing some education traded services, such as school catering, and some recruitment services including those for agency social workers. In May a new lead member was appointed. She had not previously been a member of the cabinet and has recognised she needs support to take on this role. She has attended LGA training sessions and has an experienced lead member from another authority assisting as a mentor.

The chair of Children and Young People's scrutiny also took over in May 2019 though he had previously been a member of the committee. Scrutiny members generally received fairly positive reports on children's issues, and therefore they were surprised at the Ofsted outcome. Scrutiny committees also undertake in depth reviews led by member task groups. In the years since 2015 there have only been five member tasks groups, with two of those focussed on children and young people – reviewing the support for care leavers in 2015, and reviewing employment opportunities for 18-25-year olds in 2018. This seems a very small number of reviews, leaving scrutiny members reliant only on the reports they receive. Members in Medway have had little or no training on children's issues, and this makes it difficult for them to provide effective challenge. **Going forward 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, if they are to deliver on making a real difference for children.**

Corporate parenting is chaired by the lead member. A recent event, led by the advocacy group supporting children in care and care leavers, delivered a 'reverse take-over day', where officers and members of the corporate parenting panel attended workshops to experience the challenges facing care leavers, was very well received. This kind of initiative should be repeated to create more knowledge and understanding.

There is a separate Portfolio Holder for education and schools. It has not been clear to me how he works with the lead member, and how they collaborate to jointly champion the needs of all children. **They need to provide political leadership across education and social care to create an environment that is clearly focussed in driving improved outcomes for children in Medway.**

Senior Officer Leadership

The Chief Executive is long standing, having been in the role in Medway for over 10 years. However, the management of Children's Services has been subject to considerable change, particularly in the past 4 years, and many posts have been covered by acting up or interim arrangements for some months.

The Director of People joined Medway in 2015 as the Deputy Director. When the previous Director left in July 2016, he became acting Director of People and was subsequently appointed permanently to the role. There had been 2 Assistant Director roles, one for children's social care and one for education. An interim AD social care was appointed in January 2016, and she subsequently became permanent. In July 2016 she became acting Deputy Director, and subsequently became permanent. The role covered children and adults but she only had line management responsibility for children's social care and SEN, and was the Director of People's nominated deputy.

The role of AD Education was also covered by an interim manager. In April 2017 this role was deleted. This was a significant loss in terms of leadership and focus on education issues that impact on all children, including vulnerable children. The poor relationship with schools and academies will have been negatively impacted by this. Responsibility for children centres, the YOT and Troubled Families moved to the Deputy Director. She left the Council in August 2019. An experienced interim Assistant Director started in October to manage children's social care and early help.

The current interim AD education came to Medway 18 months ago as interim HOS school improvement reporting to the Director of People. When the Deputy Director left in August this role was re-designated and given responsibility for SEND.

The Council did recognise after the inspection that the lack of expertise and senior management needed to be addressed and have agreed to re-instate both Assistant Director roles on a permanent basis. A recruitment process has started, but the Council processes are slow, meaning that it is likely to be some months before this concludes.

6. Management of children's services

The past four years has also seen a similar pattern of change and instability in management roles within children's services. The structure charts for the years from 2015 to current show frequent changes in senior and middle management roles and responsibilities over the years, with many management posts covered by interim or acting up arrangements.

An interim head of Children's Social Care was appointed in 2016, this role was then re-designated as Head of Safeguarding in 2017. In addition to the interim Head of Children's Social Care, there was an interim Head of Provider Services and a permanent Head of Integrated Family Support Services. At the same time the previous arrangement of separate Children in Care teams, and Children in Need / Child Protection teams was changed to the current POD structure of small teams of four social workers and a practice manager reporting to an area manager in four quadrants. During 2018, until the inspection, a new interim Head of Safeguarding and an interim head of improvement joined Medway.

The PODs were intended to provide continuity for children and families post assessment. Social workers hold cases from post assessment and this includes Child in Need (CIN), Child Protection Plans (CP) and Children who are Looked After (CLA). The PODs are small which can be problematic if staff are either sick or there are vacancies. Also, there are pressures on social workers managing such a broad case load with competing demands e.g. court procedures and child protection cases. I agree with the view of most managers in the service that the current structure is not fit for purpose given the issues around quality of practice. It is currently under urgent review.

The current operational service is structured into five service areas. These are:

- Single Point of Access, MASH, First Response (Assessment) and Early Help
- Area based pods, which work with children and families post assessment including child in need, child protection, court work and children in care
- Leaving Care
- Provider services which includes fostering, adoption and residential provision
- Quality Assurance (QA) service which includes Principal Social Worker and Advanced Practitioners, QA Manager, IROs and Child Protection Chairs

A separate Head of Service for SEN and children with disabilities now reports to the interim Assistant Director Education. Until August this year this post reported to the previous Deputy Director.

At the start of this review period there were four Head of Service roles covering First Response and Early Help, Safeguarding, Provider services and Quality Assurance. Two out of the four posts were covered by interim managers, one by an acting up

arrangement. A permanent Head of Service QA had just started with Medway, and the First Response and Early Help and Safeguarding posts have recently been recruited to.

Until recently three of the four Area Manager posts were covered by interim managers. At the end of November, this has reduced to two of the posts being covered by interim managers. Early Help is organised in four locality-based Children and Family hubs. Despite similar geographical arrangements there has not been effective joint working between early help and children's social care. It is likely that the instability in key management posts has been a contributory factor to improving effective co-ordination, and achieving a more timely and appropriate response for some children and their families.

7. Background

2013-2015

Medway was previously judged inadequate by Ofsted in 2013, following 2 separate inspections, covering firstly the arrangements for the protection of children and secondly looked after children's services. An improvement notice was issued in July 2013 followed by a second improvement notice issued in May 2014 due to poor performance in children's social care services. This was closed in December 2015.

The Improvement Notices go into considerable detail on the areas of concern and what needs to change. At that time, the key issues were in respect of:

- the quality and consistency of assessments, child protection conferences and child in need and child protection plans
- the need to fully implement and embed the new early help strategy
- Improve quality and consistency of care planning and commissioning for children in care and care leavers.
- Establish and use a new quality assurance framework
- Continue to secure the aims of the Workforce Strategy to consolidate and sustains improvements in developing the workforce:
- Ensure effective leadership, scrutiny and challenge continue direct and shape the quality and effectiveness of safeguarding and looked after services.

Although improvements and progress were seen by Ofsted in 2015, unfortunately many of these issues are again current concerns.

Ofsted inspection of services September 2015

The Ofsted inspection for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers and review of the effectiveness of the Local Safeguarding Children Board took place in June 2015. The overall judgement was 'requires improvement to be good.' Ofsted noted improvements in practice across the service since 2013 but also areas where more progress was needed. In summary they stated: *'Some practice remains weak or inconsistent. In a few areas, for example the quality of support provided to care leavers, practice is now good'*.

There were 13 recommendations, covering the need to ensure consistent good practice through better use of performance management information and to deliver improvements in the quality of child protection and children in need plans, permanence plans and pre-proceedings work. In particular they emphasised the need for greater senior management oversight in all aspects of the work. The recommendations including the final one: *'Take steps to minimise the disruption to children and their families from workforce changes'* are equally relevant today.

2018 onwards

Since the beginning of 2018, there have been a number of reviews and inspections, some initiated by the Council, some externally imposed. They give considerable detail on the issues to be addressed and areas for follow up. Responding to all the areas identified are likely to have been a challenge for the service, particularly given the changes and level of impermanence in the senior and middle management group.

a. Overview and scrutiny: Children and Young People and the Regeneration, Culture and Environment scrutiny committees joint task group, on employment opportunities for 18-25 year olds (Feb 2018)

The Task Group reviewed the significant level of activity underway across the Council and with regional and local partners to secure closer links between education providers and business, to support young people in the transition from education to employment and to develop effective interventions to bring down the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEETS). As part of the review they considered the opportunities for children in care and those with special educational needs and concluded that Medway has clear strategies in place but needs to focus support to ensure vulnerable young people are assisted to benefit.

The key overall finding of the review was to bring all these plans and initiatives together and develop a more collaborative approach by establishing the Medway Skills Board. **The link between this Board and the SEND Improvement Board, and the Corporate Parenting Board should be strengthened to ensure the support needs for vulnerable young people are addressed, and that they are able to benefit from opportunities.**

b. Local area SEND inspection (February 2018)

Medway was inspected in December 2017 under the Ofsted and CQC local area SEND inspection framework and its report was published in February 2018. The inspection raised concerns about both strategic and operational leadership, particularly in respect of joint working. They concluded that “regular changes in senior leadership, interim appointments and vacancies have contributed to disjointed communication and initiatives not being seen through”. The local area was required to produce a Written Statement of Action that explains how it will tackle the significant weaknesses, including:

- lack of joint strategic leadership between the council, CCG and education providers
- lack of a clearly communicated strategy that is understood and shared by leaders across the area
- the extent providers take responsibility for ensuring effective implementation of the reforms
- lack of clearly understood and effective lines of accountability

- poor quality and rigour of self-evaluation and monitoring and its effectiveness in driving improvement
- lack of information to inform accurate evaluation
- quality of EHC plans
- lack of effective co-production at all levels.

Ofsted and CQC have notified the Council that they will be re-visiting Medway on 9th-11th December to assess progress.

c. LGA Safeguarding Practice Diagnostic 20 – 22 March 2018

This peer review looked at the effectiveness of safeguarding practice in Medway. In summary the review team found a wide variation in the quality of case-practice, particularly around the voice of the child not being central to case planning, lack of challenge through supervision and management oversight and from Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs), plans not SMART and subject to drift. However, they were positive about the functioning of the front door which they found to be effective, efficient and well regarded by partners. They noted that *'beyond the front door some concerns were found e.g. although thresholds are consistent at the front door itself there does not seem to be a consistent application of them throughout subsequent case management and IRO reviews.'*

The areas they recommended Medway focussed on were:

- Embedding the structure and concentrating on improving basic practice and culture
- Ensuring there is good corporate support to implement the recruitment and retention programme.
- Ensuring a consistent and structured approach to induction procedures
- Being proactive in instilling a level of constructive challenge on behalf of children at all management levels
- Using the new Audit Tool to identify children subject to long term plans to identify drift – use challenge to change child's circumstances
- Ensuring Principal Social Workers have a clear plan in place for a programme of improvement and ensure social workers and POD managers have the appropriate knowledge and skills around the use of evidence- based interventions that can create change in the lives of children

d. Joint targeted area inspection of the multi-agency response to domestic abuse in Medway inspection June 2018

Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission (CQC), HMI Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) and HMI Probation (HMI Prob) undertook a joint inspection of the multi-agency response to domestic abuse in Medway. In summary they concluded: *Multi-agency working in Medway is not consistently effective in ensuring that the right*

children receive the right services quickly enough; some children are left in situations of unassessed risk. There are a number of examples of good practice. These include the weekly 'one-stop-shop', which provides open access to a broad range of services for victims of domestic abuse each Tuesday morning, and the practice of holding weekly multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARAC), which helps ensure the timely and joined-up provision of services in many higher-risk situations. Overall, however risk is not consistently recognised and responded to in a timely and coordinated manner.

The local partnership is at an important stage, with a strong shared commitment to developing an effective MASH and to tackling the impact on children of domestic abuse, but with services lacking coherence and not consistently effective. Developments such as new early help arrangements, agreed commissioning intentions, plans to implement Operation Encompass and a new multi-agency governance structure for tackling domestic abuse are all positive. However, at this stage, most plans are either not yet in place or are too new to have had an impact on improving outcomes for children.'

The inspection identified issues in respect of information sharing at the MASH, particularly with health, high turnover in social work staff, often too long a wait between allocation and first visit, recording of supervision and management oversight inconsistent. They noted that the YOS was a strong service, but that the local authority needs to improve decision making in MASH.

Overall there is a sense that the evident commitment to the MASH and joint working, needs to be followed through with stronger strategic leadership ensuring greater co-ordination of effective response and delivery.

e. Review of Alternative Provision (AP) in Medway June 2018 by JWP Consultancy Ltd

This review was commissioned by the Council in February 2018. The consultants were asked to review whether the local authority can support schools to retain more children and young people within mainstream schools who have additional needs or behavioural difficulties who are at risk of exclusion or placement breakdown. The starting point for the review was concerns that rates of exclusion in Medway were exceptionally high and could not be fully explained by levels of deprivation or the existence of selective schools in the community. There was variability: eight primary schools accounted for half of all fixed-term exclusions and five secondary schools for two thirds of all permanent exclusions.

The review found that high levels of exclusion, the rarity of reintegration and the low agreed number of commissioned places meant that there was not enough space in the two Medway AP schools to accommodate even half of permanently excluded children. This forced the LA to commission placements in settings which were either less than 'good' or were not quality assured by Ofsted or anyone else. This situation was not helped by a lack of clarity in the LA's coordination of early help.

There was one long-standing LA-led initiative aimed at reducing exclusion. The Schools Support Group (SSG) is run by the LA's Inclusion team and has been operating for 8 or more years. It is attended by some LA teams, special schools that provide outreach and one AP school.

Many stakeholders drew attention to changes in personnel at the LA and expressed the view that, for some years, the LA had not presented a coherent, coordinated or strategic approach to tackling exclusion and the use of AP.

The reviewers concluded that there are capacity issues in AP, and structural issues within the local authority, most notably an absence of a clear lead person for exclusion and AP and disjointed lines of reporting among senior officers.

Since the review, the interim AD Education has worked more closely with schools than was previously the case. Permanent exclusions have fallen. Proposals have been submitted to the DFE for two new free schools, one to create an all age AP unit on one site, and one to meet a range of SEN needs. Feasibility work is underway in relation to both schemes.

f. Hampshire peer challenge- Partners in Practice Sector Led Improvement (May 2018 and January 2019)

Managers from Hampshire Council spent a number of days with Medway observing practice and supporting Medway managers to consider strengths and improvements in Medway's Quality Assurance and Performance Management, how it is working and the impact on practice. In January they looked at the effectiveness of the IRO & CP chair function, and impact of outcomes for children.

The process was very interactive with managers providing challenge through questioning and offering ideas on how to improve. **It is clear from the written record of the visits that inconsistency in practice, and lack of rigour in challenge from auditing and from the IROs and CP chairs continued to be key concerns that Medway needed to tackle.**

g. Ofsted Focussed visit February 2019

The inspectors reviewed the local authority's arrangements for responding to contacts and referrals at their 'front door'. In conclusion they judged that referrals are dealt with appropriately and well. Marked improvements in the local authority's response to contacts and referrals since the joint targeted area inspection in June 2018 were noted. Processes to support social work practice, new at the time of the previous visit, had been embedded and strengthened. In most cases, children and their families received a timely and proportionate response to their needs. They also noted good morale and support for staff, and that assessments were timely although the quality was inconsistent. There remained some concerns about the sharing of health information and some police sharing of information.

They did not look at longer term work in other parts of the service.

h. Formal visit by the National Implementation Advisor for care leavers in June 2019

Following a two-day visit, the National Advisor wrote a positive feedback letter to the Council particularly commenting on a strong set of ambitions for all to experience Medway as a good place to live, work, learn and visit. However, he got a sense that staff and care leavers did not know what this really meant for care leavers. He made a number of recommendations aimed at strengthening the commitment to and support for care leavers, not just by Children's social care, but with other parts of the Council, and partners, particularly health.

Since the visit, the Council have opened a small centre for care leavers, where they can obtain advice and support. The centre has washing, cooking and recreational facilities. It is hoped that other agencies will also use the centre to develop the range of support available.

8. The Council's oversight of performance and actions to improve

It is clear that in the past 18 months to 2 years the Council has sought advice on the challenges facing children's services and that is positive. As detailed above it has received a significant amount of reviews and assessments of its services from a number of external agencies and partners. There has been insufficient direct action taken in response to these findings at the time of them being shared. The associated failure to bring all the findings together in a co-ordinated way, with clear priorities and coherent actions, has undoubtedly reduced the potential impact of changes made. Although the previous lead member, and then the Chief Executive from May, chaired a monthly internal Delivery Board to over-see performance in children's social care, it is difficult to extract from the minutes, which provide considerable detail on individual issues, an overall picture of the challenges and priorities and how they were being addressed. The meetings just prior to the Ofsted inspection do not seem to have identified or focussed on the range of practice concerns that Ofsted found in July.

Improvement action identified by the Council is captured in the presentation to Ofsted for the annual conversation meeting in February 2019, and presented again at the outset of the ILACS inspection in July. This included:

1. Three projects underway to deliver improvements to fostering and develop mobile working and efficiency through roll out of Microsoft Surface Pros to enable front-line children's services staff to access case management records or input directly into the live electronic record while out of the office.
2. Recruitment in Senior Leadership team to build capacity, oversight and experience (Sept/Oct 2018)
3. Paying relentless attention to improving practice, planning for our children and ensuring permanence is considered at the first point of contact
4. Further develop Early Help offer with partners including a launch of our Early Help Strategy and Early Help Practice Framework
5. Refresh of Children and Young People's Plan
6. Continue our cycle of learning and practice development
7. Engagement with partners at strategic boards and individual strategic meetings between DCS and health partners
8. Ambitious workforce development programme
9. Engagement with improvement offers from DfE partners in practice
10. Parent, Carer and Young People representatives included in Strategic Boards and Committees across the Local Authority and CCG
11. Co-production with parents and young people now embedded within 0-25 SEND, Forums and Strategic Planning
12. A comprehensive recruitment and retention offer

Many of these actions are about process. The self- assessment gives little evidence of impact on improving the quality of practice.

9. Ofsted inspection of children's services July 2019

The inspection was carried out between 15 July and 26 July 2019. The inspection report found that the overall effectiveness in relation to children's services was 'inadequate'. In summary the key findings were:

- Staffing issues and delays in allocation in early help, fragmented early help hubs and edge of care services
- Responses to referrals at the MASH were appropriate, but then there was too much delay in progressing cases
- Quality of assessments was inconsistent and often lacking analysis
- Little understanding of how to intervene in families where there is long-term experience of neglect and domestic violence
- Public outline work was not tracked by managers and taking too long
- Poor management tracking of child sexual exploitation concerns and missing children
- Access to health provision for children in care and care leavers poor.
- Inspectors brought to the attention of senior managers 74 children from 43 families who they considered at risk of significant harm or where there were serious delays in progressing plans to reduce the risk
- Insufficient analysis and understanding of underlying complexities and continuing risks to children
- Over optimistic auditing
- Positive workforce keen to do the right thing but struggling with high numbers of cases
- Supervision was happening but not resulting in changes for children and not making children safer.

The Council have since looked at all the children who were raised as concerns by the inspectors and action has been taken to progress those cases. There are ten identified areas for improvement which are being addressed through the Improvement Plan.

10. The Council's response

The outcome of the inspection was not anticipated by the leadership of the Council who had expected that as in 2015, the judgement would be requiring improvement to be good. They were initially dismayed but quickly wanted to move things forward and identify what needed to be sorted. Since July there has been agreement to appoint an additional 8 social workers and a practice manager and this has helped reduce caseloads in assessment.

Discussions had taken place prior to the inspection with Ealing Council, who are an approved DFE Partner in Practice (PiP) about providing support on practice improvements. The process had been delayed because of the July inspection. In September it was agreed they would start this support with assistance on Q.A. and auditing.

The Delivery Board was changed to a Transformation Board, and then agreed it would be a monthly multi-agency Improvement Board with an independent chair. The first meeting took place in October.

The Deputy Director left in August. Responsibility for SEN moved to the then interim Head of Education who became interim AD education. The Social Care AD role was vacant for some weeks until the current interim AD started in the middle of October. However, an experienced head of improvement was brought in immediately after the inspection and began work on developing the improvement plan and ensuring immediate follow up on the Ofsted recommendations, where possible, and on the referred cases. This activity included reviewing permanency processes and panels, putting in place monthly PLO tracking, and suspending audits while the newly appointed Head of Q.A. was tasked with introducing an improved auditing framework with the support of Ealing.

Agreement was reached to establish the AD roles for education and children's social care on a permanent footing. A process to recruit to those roles is underway. Permanent appointments have been made to three of the social care Head of Service roles.

Since the inspection more attention has been paid to staff engagement. The Director of People briefed staff on the morning of publication and there have been two recent engagement events for all staff. A staff reference group was established in October, and two members of staff are on the Improvement Board. However, it is clear from staff feedback, that they do not see enough of senior leaders, and communication has historically been poor. **More regular staff events attended by senior leaders, and visits by them to front line services would create greater confidence in the staff group that their views are heard, understood and being responded to.**

There are plans to improve the current case management system, Framework, by upgrading to an improved system Mosaic.

People too proposal Sept 19

Following the inspection, the Council asked for a proposal from an experienced consultancy, People too, to review the coordination and management oversight of early help services to support children to receive the right help at the right time; and the risks that some children who require statutory help and protection are not recognized soon enough by early help managers and that children are stepped down too soon.

Rightly, in my view, this proposal is not being followed up pending the outcome of this review, and the potential of support through the DFE PiP programme.

11. Further reviews since the Ofsted inspection

a) Review of the structure and operation of the teams responsible for the placement of looked after children October 2019

A consultant, Jon Gilbert, was commissioned to undertake this review to look at how placements are secured for looked after children, and if this leads to positive outcomes. This is an extremely detailed 56- page report with many recommendations including urgent ones to improve placement finding and contracting, and to extend local and in-house options.

The existing sufficiency strategy which was agreed in September 2018 needs updating in the light of this report.

b) LGA Children's Resources and Efficiency Peer Challenge October 2019

Prior to the inspection, the Council had asked the LGA to undertake this peer challenge to help them identify areas where they could improve efficiency and value for money in the delivery of children's services. The review was delayed by the inspection but took place in October. The key conclusion was:

The current structure for Children's Services does not provide the capacity to match existing demands and is not fit for purpose in terms of breadth of accountability, spans of control and resilience. The application of thresholds and partner responsibilities to supporting children in need is not well understood or embedded, resulting in too many referrals escalating to statutory services. It is unclear what 'typical' ongoing demand levels on the service should be. With short term investment to understand this, there could be significant efficiencies and therefore ongoing reductions in the financial spend from the existing level. Helping families earlier at a lower cost and creating more resilience through effective universal provision will reduce the burden on the Council of high cost statutory provision.

The conclusions above are in line with my own, as is their view that there is a need to consolidate the plethora of plans, reviews and information.

In addition, they felt that the recent Gilbert report will assist with the development of better systems to understand sufficiency and demand. However, the Council needs to build on this analysis to create the rationale, market analysis (and influence) and commissioning strategy to anticipate need and plan the delivery of alternative resources. The planning process should include a review of the decision making around children's placements, aligning budget accountability and professional challenge.

SEND budgets and external residential placements are increasing, with a low number of cases accepted to be eligible for health funding. Staff were able to suggest reasons for

the increases, but there is no co-ordinated system for reporting and analysing trends. The Commissioning team should develop systems to monitor and predict demand for SEND services and this should include reviewing criteria and decision making to ensure financial accountability is correctly apportioned.

There are recommendations on vision, delegation, structure, commissioning, SEND and QA which I agree with, and which need to be built into the Improvement Plan.

12. Current service issues and performance

In the course of this review, I have visited front line services, talked to staff, managers and partners and attended a number of panels and meetings where cases and service issues were under discussion. What I have seen and heard is similar to the observations made by the Ofsted inspections, and more recently by the LGA peer reviewers, and summarised in earlier sections of the report.

There a number of additional points that must be tackled:

1. Numbers of referrals, and of children subject to child protection plans have risen in the past few months. It is important for the service to assure itself that decision making and the application of thresholds is consistent and appropriate. Improved auditing will assist with this

2. There is an immediate need to improve understanding of the model of practice and how this supports positive interventions with families. When asked, some social workers describe the model of practice as 'strengthening families underpinned by systemic practice'. Others talk of using 'Signs of Safety'. It is clear that past training has not been effective and few of the current staff believe that the Social Work practice model had been successfully rolled out, embedded or had an impact on practice. A clear model of practice is essential to supporting front line staff to deliver a consistent, timely and effective response to families.

3. Medway also need to develop the use of Family Group conferences, which are provided on a limited basis and currently have a waiting list. This should be a key resource to support positive work with families

4. The role of early help needs urgent review and attention to become a skilled service which prevents situations escalating and needing social care involvement, and to enable cases to be stepped down from social care when appropriate. The capacity of early help staff has been reduced by recent unhelpful changes which created separate assessment and intervention teams. Several years ago, early help were given responsibility for finding accommodation for families deemed intentionally homeless and responsibility for families with no recourse to public funds resulting in some staff dealing with difficult housing and finance issues. Some families are placed at a considerable distance from Medway but are then visited every 6 weeks. Early help services are unlikely to be the most appropriate service to respond to these issues.

Early help is not sufficiently connected to children's social care despite a presence in the MASH. Both parts of the service use different case management systems which makes sharing information difficult. Similarly, the council runs 15 community hubs from library buildings, offering open access support to families, but these are not joined up with the early help hubs. There are many longstanding and committed staff in early help but many of them feel let down by the Council. They talk about no vision for early help, frequent re-

structures, not being involved in decisions that affect them, and the impact of budget savings.

Senior managers are aware of these issues, and the People too proposal was intended to offer a way forward. There is great potential to join up more with social care, with the community hubs and with partners to create a co-ordinated responsive and effective local service for families. Using the existing knowledge, building on staffs' experience and using best practice evidence from local authorities is likely to achieve a better outcome than commissioning another set of consultants to undertake a diagnostic.

5. The concerns about the quality of practice are key issues for the Improvement Plan to address. More rigour is needed in all parts of the process. Social workers with high caseloads struggle with prioritising tasks. Agency workers can leave the authority at short notice and this leaves a full workload needing to be re-allocated. The impact can be seen in different ways. There are unallocated cases. The number is reducing and now stands at around 15 but has been as high as 60 in the past few months. The Child Protection chairs report that too often social workers are not writing reports in a timely way so they can be discussed with families prior to the conference. They also see little reflective work, with too many situations being responded to as a crisis.

6. Medway have one residential unit, Old Vic, which is not well used as it is not suitable for the current more complex needs of young people. Cabinet have recently agreed to the closure of the unit and proposals to be drawn up to develop a new unit that will link to improved adolescent edge of care service, and be able to accommodate young people who present greater challenges. There are recent discussions with the police on developing an integrated service focussed on issues related to serious youth violence, with in year funding from the Police and Crime Commissioner. **Both these initiatives should be joined up to meet complex needs that currently are not able to be met in Medway and should be progressed as rapidly as possible.**

7. Medway has one residential unit for short breaks. Aut Even is a residential respite centre for young people with disabilities. It supports children with learning disabilities with a range of needs. In December 2017, Cabinet approved the move of the short breaks provision from its current Aut Even site (which was unsuitable) to Parklands, based in Gillingham, designed to provide increased provision of over night and day short breaks, a special needs playgroup and family assessments in a much more suitable facility. This is a good move but has taken a long time, with Parklands still not yet open and Aut-Even not accepting new referrals.

8. The Improvement Board will meet monthly. It met for the first time in October, and membership comprises senior representation from the CCG, police, schools and the Council. The DCS in Oxfordshire has agreed to be the independent chair. The Board will receive performance reports with data against most key children's services indicators, but also needs to see the outcome of improved auditing. It will over-see implementation of the improvement plan, respond to Ofsted recommendations and those of future

monitoring visits, and ensure the Council and its partners are actively addressing the main concerns.

The Board must ensure that there is a co-ordinated approach to improvement, and that there is sufficient pace in delivering change.

13. Partnership and the wider system

There is little evidence that strategic partnerships in Medway have driven improvement consistently and sufficiently, although senior leaders express a strong commitment to making this a reality.

Medway has implemented new Safeguarding arrangements as required by Working Together. The Medway Safeguarding Partnership (MSCP) was set up in September to replace the Local Safeguarding Children Board. The executive, the local authority, CCG and Police have agreed to have a rotating chair, currently the Director of People, and to appoint 2 independent scrutineers. One will provide over-view and challenge to the executive and wider partnership, the other will provide oversight of the secure estate.

Medway has two establishments – a Young Offender institute, and a Secure Training Centre (STC) within its boundaries. The STC was subject of a Serious Case Review, following a BBC programme broadcast in 2016, which showed filming by an undercover reporter of bullying and excessive use of aggressive behaviour by staff. Historically the location of these two establishments have created demands on the local authority. Although very few of the residents are from Medway, the partnership has taken its safeguarding responsibilities seriously and have recruited a dedicated LADO to respond to allegations as well as appointing the independent scrutineer. The STC will be closing in March and will re-open in September next year as the first national secure school.

The partnership will over-see the work of a number of sub-groups, some of which operate jointly with Kent. In addition, they intend holding a wider partnership leadership event twice a year. Key areas of work are quality assurance, and continuing the practice of quarterly themed audits and continued training. Previous multi-agency audits have looked at Mental Health, CWD, Child Sexual Exploitation and Domestic Violence. Common themes emerged – not enough consideration of impact on all members of the family, need for greater understanding of children's behaviour and looking at root cause, insufficient evidence of the voice of child and direct work informing decision making, neglect being addressed in a timely way – graded care profile not being used early enough and lack of meaningful challenge and escalation.

Two independent scrutineers have been appointed to work alongside the partnership. One of these will focus on issues pertaining to the safety and welfare of children and young people in the secure estate, and the second will fulfil a broader scrutiny function with a particular focus on the effectiveness of multi-agency working.

The findings of the multi-agency audits need to inform future training and development alongside the social care auditing.

It is not clear if the previous LSCB was aware of the concerns about social work practice. The MSCP needs to link closely to the work of the Improvement Board and in future become an effective forum for driving improved partnership working.

Both health and the Police operate across Kent and Medway. As in most areas, the arrangements for health commissioning and provision are complicated. Currently the CCGs covering Medway and Swale are developing an integrated care partnership. A bid has gone to NHS England to merge the 8 CCGs which cover Kent and Medway which will include children's commissioning across all CCGs.

Partnership commissioning is a joint venture between Medway Council and NHS Medway CCG, commissioning services such as children's community nursing, specialist school nursing, LAC health services and access to CAMHS. The staff, although representing both the council and the CCG are employed and managed through the council officers. The CCG are proposing that when the new single Kent and Medway CCG is formed there is a strengthening of the reporting lines within the partnership commissioning team with improved day to day reporting to executives and senior managers within both council and CCG. In addition, it is proposed to increase scrutiny of performance and quality feeding into the respective governance systems

This suggests that provision of health care, and monitoring of it, must be improved. One of the key areas of concern expressed by many in Medway is the lack of availability of CAMHS support, with reports of waiting times of up to 2 years for treatment, although this has reduced to around 40 weeks in the last six months. **This is unacceptable for the most vulnerable children in Medway, who are not being effectively prioritised, and should be urgently addressed by commissioning, children's services and the CCG.**

In July 2019, Kent Police were subject of a safeguarding inspection by HMICFRS. The report was published in September and described a number of strengths including good governance and oversight of child protection work, increased numbers of officers and staff working in teams dedicated to addressing different aspects of vulnerability and child protection, examples of effective working arrangements with relevant partner agencies (for example, in cases involving child exploitation by criminal gangs in 'county lines' drug investigations) and the placement of specialist community support officers directly into its Community Safety Units.

The Police have welcomed the approach being taken by the current AD social care to work more collaboratively and are positive about developing a more integrated local response in Medway to complex adolescents with children's social care.

The majority (63%) of schools in Medway are academies, all except one secondary school and most of the primaries and special schools. The local authority has failed to foster a strong partnership with its schools and academies. The current interim AD has tried to address this but much more is needed. The changes in managers and number of interim arrangements in the Council has not helped. The head teachers have strong views about lack of communication from the Council about issues and roles and responsibilities. They would like to see a much more coherent and better co-ordinated approach to vulnerable young people and SEN, and would be very keen to be involved in developing and supporting work on this.

Medway also faces challenges in terms of inclusivity and has higher than average numbers of children with an Education, Health and Care plan in special provision. The variation in schools' willingness to meet SEN needs creates challenges for the Council and for those schools with a more inclusive approach.

14. Staffing

Issues relating to recruitment and retention of social workers have been an ongoing concern for many years in Medway. The proportion of staff who are agency workers, particularly in manager roles is high, as shown in the table below, which reflects the position in September 2019.

	Estab FTE	Perm FTE	Agency FTE	Posts Over current establishment	Unfilled posts	Need to recruit
Service Manager	5.00	3.00	2.00	0.00	0.00	3.00
Area Managers	8.00	4.00	5.00	1.00	0.00	4.00
Practice Managers	22.00	18.80	7.00	3.80	0.00	3.20
Social worker	125.89	102.43	50.20	30.73	5.00	23.88
NQSW	18.00	18.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Total	188.89	154.23	66.20	35.53	5.00	36.08

There is a strong Workforce and Development Strategy which covers all appropriate key activities to improve recruitment and retention. Strengths include: increased number of practice managers; partnership with Community Care Live; oversees recruitment; micro-site; refer a friend; Social Care Academy; conversion of agency staff to permanent roles; mobile working, good recruitment of ASYE's and recruitment through Step-Up programme. The strategy also focuses on retention of staff, using exit interviews and the Community Care Retention Risk Tool to help understand the reasons for staff leaving Medway.

Updates have been consistently reported to the Delivery Board, and now to the Improvement Board. As of June 2019, the vacancy rate for all children's social worker roles was 29%, with a rate of 27% in the safeguarding teams

The management and accountability for recruitment and retention was moved to the Medway Commercial Group for a period of time but has now moved back to the Council

which is improving pace and focus, and will help with progressing implementation of the strategy. The current arrangements are strong and well placed to support the service.

There is a strong sense that one of the key difficulties for Medway is its location, wedged between Kent and London. However, it is likely that the lack of clarity about the vision for the children and the service, and the instability in key management posts has been a significant contributory factor. **A stronger sense of leadership and direction is needed, faster recruitment to key posts, as well as a clear sense of the uniqueness and benefits of working in Medway.**

Views of staff

As part of this review, I commissioned an experienced independent senior social work manager to undertake 2 days of interviews with front line social workers holding long term cases, to better understand their individual experiences of working in Medway. The social workers interviewed were a mix of long-standing experienced staff, mainly permanent but a few agency, and much more recently appointed less experienced workers.

The responses are similar to the Ofsted findings. The interviewer found committed and positive staff wanting to do a good job, but trying to manage big workloads. In her view the caseloads in this service were too high by 30-50%. *“Social Workers cannot be properly held to account for their professional standards when they are not equipped with the tools/capacity to do the work. Additionally, systems are not clear or understood. It is difficult for staff to work with what they see as inconsistency in safety thresholds by managers.”* She also recommended that the case allocation system is reviewed and improved to enable social workers to have sensible caseloads, increase their ability to intervene more actively with families and to achieve high standards for their children and families.

The social workers were asked what would improve their work situation. The responses included: retention strategy, greater clarity of processes and systems, an improved computer system, upgraded working environment, better career opportunities for more experienced social workers and development of Medway as a children’s services learning organisation.

When asked how they managed their work and prioritised on a day to day basis, the unanimous response was that *‘Child Protection would always take priority as at least Children in Care were safe’*. One social worker said *“I’m so sad for my Looked After Children. I just can’t do what I should do and they don’t get what they need and deserve from me.”*

I also met with individual social workers and managers, and attended two recent staff engagement events. There is recognition of recent changes to bring in additional social

workers and the focus on reducing caseloads. The comments below give a flavour of what staff are saying:

'Increasingly difficult to recruit SWs but caseloads coming down from 30/40- 30/20' (Area Manager)

'Challenge to balance work, time gets in the way' (SW)

'Feature of Medway – people acting up for long periods' (HOS)

'Too many consultants' - manager

Consultation has begun on proposals to re-align the service to create separate Children in Care teams, and to promote greater joint working between early help and children's social care. As part of this exercise an analysis is underway on what is the appropriate establishment going forward. This work should greatly assist in brining down workloads and improving the quality of practice.

15. Financial position

The recent LGA peer review concluded that – ‘The Council has a good track record of corporate financial management and there are reasonable and prudent assumptions within its existing corporate financial planning. However, like many councils the pressures are becoming greater. In Medway, more needs to be done to fully understand the underlying causes of budget pressures in Children’s Services, particularly in relation to placement costs for children in care and SEND budgets. There are opportunities to further develop corporate strategic financial business partnering to strengthen the link between operational practice and medium-term financial planning’.

The review also looked at comparative spend. Overall core spending by Medway at £688 per person remains below the unitary average of £792 and the rate of increase was one of the lowest in the unitary group in 2019/20. In common with other Councils, Children’s Social Care has increased as a proportion of the overall budget from 18% in 2013/14 to a forecast 25% in 2019/20.

Since 2015, there have been financial pressures in children’s services, mainly on placement costs, and staffing, not surprising given increasing demands and a relatively low level of funding. The table below shows the children’s social care revenue budgets since 2015:

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
	£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's
Budget	33.292	34.586	32.084	33.299	36.430
Outturn	34.648	32.976	32.939	35.718	39.761

(*2019/20 outturn is based on the round 2 forecast.)

The large savings made in 2016/17 were in Early Years (Children centres) and Youth Services.

The Council’s overall financial pressures have resulted in a staffing recruitment moratorium across the Council. Children’s social work posts are exempt from this. In 2018/19 approval was given to recruit 10 additional social worker posts above the approved budgeted structure during the year. Six of these posts were included in the 2019/20 budget. In addition, this year, approval has been given to recruit 15.5 additional social worker posts above the approved budgeted structure, at a cost of c£1.5m. It is intended to build these posts into the 2020/21 base budget. It is clear from talking to senior and middle managers that the tight financial position makes forward planning difficult and that financial pressures are a more significant factor in decisions about services development than the quality of services, and impact on children.

The over reliance on interim and agency managers and social workers will place demands on the budget which could be lessened by successful recruitment and retention.

The High Needs Budget is of concern. The latest Revenue Budget Monitoring projects a cumulative deficit of £10.3 million on the DSG High Needs reserve by the 31 March 2020. As required, the Council submitted a Deficit Recovery Plan to the Department of Education at the end of June 2019, however, this did not address the deficit in full. A further plan is now in development, focussing on: supporting Medway's schools to be more inclusive, working with the Clinical Commissioning Group to ensure NHS funding is provided in all appropriate cases, reviewing high cost placements to ensure the best packages are provided in the most economical way, the creation of additional SEND provision locally, and continuing to lobby the Government for additional funding.

16. Summary of issues

The Council officers and 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.

17. Analysis of progress, capacity for improvement and conclusion

Since 2015, many key management roles in children's services have been covered by interim or acting up arrangements. This has had unfortunate consequences in terms of continuity, stability and direction. When the current Director of People took up the role in 2016, he retained line management responsibility for 2 key head of service roles (both covered by interims) for a period of time and given the wide span of his responsibilities covering both adult and children's services, this inevitably meant that he could not effectively over-see and direct their work.

There were several reviews commissioned in 2018 /19, and this year. This seems very different from previous years when I have not been made aware of any reviews. This activity may well have been prompted by the external inspections, the JTIA and SEND. The Council had sought advice but seemed slow to act. Whilst it is positive that the authority has sought to bring in external expertise and advice, the conclusions and recommendations from each review are significant and will require management and political focus and drive to respond and deliver improvements in a coherent and effective way.

Senior leaders should have ensured that the messages from each review or inspection were fully considered not just individually but in terms of their inter-relationship. The work this year to develop the new CYP plan should have been the opportunity to bring these issues together, to agree priorities and actions that would start to make a real and co-ordinated difference. Without an action and delivery plan this will not happen.

Many of the people I spoke to emphasised that the Council is very finance driven and overly bureaucratic. The commitment of the Director of People to improving outcomes for children is evident, however decisions that should be within his delegated authority do not always progress without political and Chief Executive involvement, particularly where there are financial implications. The process to agree to an Improvement budget, which took some weeks and required agreement by the Leader, is a significant example of this. The Leader has retained the finance portfolio. Given the relative inexperience of the lead member, he needs to ensure that she is supported to fully focus on children while still bearing in mind the financial constraints. Fundamentally there is a need to create an environment in the Council that gives enough priority to meeting the needs of children.

Whilst the Chief Executive, the Leader and the lead member have all been explicit about their determination to see improvements to the service, they do not articulate their vision and ambitions for children and young people enough, and it does not feature so prominently in their strategic narrative as does their aspirations for Medway growth and for a city of culture. The newly drafted children and young people's plan is appropriately ambitious and needs to be driven by the whole Council, not just children's Services. However, there is not yet an agreed action plan to ensure timely implementation.

Political and officer strategic leadership needs to improve, particularly in respect of the relationship with schools, but across the whole system, to improve direction, co-ordination and effectiveness.

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 piece-meal. 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.

Recent successful recruitment to Head of Service posts is a positive development. The recruitment to the two Assistant Director posts is critically important to secure permanent expertise and capability, and a greater joining up of strategic leadership in both social care and education. Too little attention has been given to key education issues which impact on vulnerable children, and there has not been enough focus on working closely and positively with schools and academies.

The Council has been open to securing support and advice and this needs to continue in a more formal agreement. In my view, they also need help to make best use of such support. If they do this, there may not be a need to consider an alternative delivery model. Discussions have taken place with a small number of good or outstanding local authorities, and the outcome of those is reflected in the recommendations.

18. Risks to achieving and sustaining improvement

- Failure to develop political and corporate drive and to successfully recruit to senior management roles
- Failure to maximise the benefits of an agreed programme of support to add capacity and capability
- Lack of sufficient pace and decision making on a range of issues
- Impact of a poor SEND re-visit, alongside the sizable challenges already facing the Council

19. Recommendations

1. The Leader, lead member, Chief Executive and Director of People must ensure that they prioritise what needs to change, to co-ordinate action, to be clear about the implications and potential consequences and to implement change in a planned way.
2. There are two key strands to the support that is needed. Firstly, the council leadership needs direct and intensive support to drive better scrutiny, understanding and leadership of children's social care – without this all other improvement activity will not achieve the rapid and significant changes needed. I would recommend that the Council is directed to work with a suitable leadership improvement partner to support the leadership to address recommendation one, and to develop the wider system, working with key partners in education, health and police, as well as across the Council.
3. The second areas of focus are the practice and front-line service delivery issues. Additional children's social care expertise and support must be secured through the Partners in Practice programme, or other expert advisors, to support the required improvements.
4. Recruitment to the two Assistant Director roles must proceed rapidly to secure robust and stable leadership to help drive change, and to provide greater confidence that progress will be sustained.
5. The Improvement Board must be the forum to over-see, challenge and support both the Council and its partners. The Chair of the Improvement Board must report progress on a regular basis to the DFE.
6. The Commissioner role should be retained for a period of time to allow the Commissioner to assess and report back to the Minister for Children and Families within six months, whether the support has had the intended impact, or if not, if the Council should continue to retain operational control.

Eleanor Brazil
Commissioner for Children's Social Care in Medway

December 2019

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