

Learning, improvement and innovation

Score: 2

2 - Evidence shows some shortfalls

The local authority commitment

We focus on continuous learning, innovation and improvement across our organisation and the local system. We encourage creative ways of delivering equality of experience, outcome and quality of life for people. We actively contribute to safe, effective practice and research.

Key findings for this quality statement

Continuous learning, improvement and professional development

Staff had ongoing access to learning and support, to ensure Care Act duties were delivered safely. The Kent and Medway Safeguarding Adults Board offered multi-agency training, predominantly for staff from the statutory sector. In response to feedback from SARs and a course content review, all half-day courses were increased to full day courses. There was still ongoing learning and actions to be embedded from the Local Government Association (LGA) in January 2022 and Safeguarding Adult Review recommendations.

Staff we spoke to were well informed, knowledgeable, and passionate. Staff received annual and ongoing training to ensure they were continually upskilled. Staff told us there was clear leadership support, and investment in further learning. Although there were staff shortages and recruitment challenges, measures to retain staff included offering apprenticeships and Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) for social workers. The local authority had provided 6 student social work placements in 2022/23, 4 employees had achieved Practice Educator Professional Standard (PEPS) level 1, and 2 employees had achieved PEPS level 2. Furthermore, the local authority had an adult's and children's apprenticeship programme in collaboration with Kent University. This programme was able to support 2 adult social work apprenticeships a year. There were also processes in place to support social work practitioners who were training to be practice educators.

There had been some efforts to support continuous professional development. Senior leaders had recognised a need to improve their strength-based practice training.

The Principal Social Worker (PSW) was developing a team which had a focus on recruiting social workers in practice management and development role. The practice development manager roles planned to focus on providing real time learning from Kent Medway Safeguarding Board, with learning groups and task and finish groups. Safeguarding learning and processes still needed to be embedded in frontline practice. Some practice development manager had already commenced in these roles with others yet to start.

The PSW practice development roles also planned to focus on workforce development, training opportunities, including strengths based practice legal literacy, guidance and research, and to lead on the quality assurance framework. For further learning and development, the Principal Social Worker wrote monthly staff bulletins, and sent out practice postcards frequently to staff across adult social care which was well received by the staff we spoke to.

The local authority recognised challenges to staffing and had therefore introduced a 'right-sizing' project to recruit new staff to meet the needs of the teams, and to ensure all teams had the correct number of staff to carry out their statutory duties safely and effectively. At the time of the assessment this project remained ongoing as there had historically been a heavy reliance on locum staff although many of the locum staff were embedded in the teams. Staff we spoke to also felt recruitment was an improvement area needing to be addressed to ensure effective team productivity.

The local authority needed to do more work in collaborating with people and partners to actively promote new ways of working which improved people's social care experiences and outcomes. Senior leaders had acknowledged this and were facilitating more collaborative working across the local authority. They had introduced an Adult Social Care Engagement and Project Manager role to support with improvements around coproduction. The local authority had also initiated the development of a coproduction policy which they planned to implement over a 12-month period.

A senior leader told us working with partners could be improved however, they felt the local authority and some partners worked well together to deliver against the agenda 'Care for Medway' with new practices such as an increased use of assistive technology.

The local authority demonstrated efforts to address gaps in shared learning. For example, they held open days for local people to learn about the services on offer. However, a recent open day was not very well attended, and it was felt this was due to a lack of advertisement. Plans were in place to continue open days and reflect on lessons learnt from previous sessions. Partners told us the local authority showed a focus on improvements and a commitment to deliver good services for local people. Staff spoke positively about the new Pathways and Processes Project, which included various workshops across the local authority to give staff the opportunity to actively contribute their thoughts and to suggest improvements. Staff said they felt listened to by senior leaders and thought improvements would make a positive impact on the customer journey for local people. Staff also told us there had been encouragement for innovation and support from senior leaders and the PSW.

The local authority actively participated in peer review and sector-led improvement activities. The local authority drew on external support to improve when necessary, for example the Local Government Association Test of Assurance was carried out in 2021, which informed much of the local authority's improvement plans. Partners told us they had been consulted on the development of some local policies and strategies, including the local plan, the joint health strategy, and the local climate response group.

Staff and leaders engaged with research, and embedded evidence-based practice in the local authority. Some community and voluntary partners told us the local authority had worked with them to understand the needs of their communities. This included coproducing an information pack for people of Medway which entailed all relevant information on services available as well as useful links and contacts. The objective of this project was to engage more people and reach wider communities.

Community health partners told us project work with the local authority was on the increase and co-production partners said the local authority worked with them to influence policy and some local authority's strategies. For example the Legislative Theatre where frontline staff worked alongside individuals who had been homeless to deliver a play.

Learning from feedback

There was some learning from people's feedback about their experiences of care and support. The local authority had identified the need to improve communication with people who use services and their carers, to draw feedback on their experience of care and support.

Partners told us how feedback had been used to influence and drive improvements within the local authority. This included work around social isolation and self-harming. Whilst other partners said had little response from the local authority when they had given feedback, the local authority recognised they needed a different approach to obtain and use feedback. The local authority wanted to use the qualitative data to drive improvements.

Staff we spoke to told us twice yearly case audits and observations had been introduced and they felt this process of quality assurance was beneficial, as it allowed them to get direct feedback from their manager. This also allowed staff to consider ways of improving their own practice by engaging in peer reviews. This had helped staff to maintain their social work ethics and values. The local authority regularly celebrated and recognised the good work from staff the positive outcomes they delivered for people.

The Adult Social Care staff survey, February 2024, demonstrated the local authority were committed to improve learning and development, including bite-sized training to provide more specialist training sessions, for example, dementia, improved induction training, and mandatory regular supervisions. A survey completed by staff used people's feedback for reflection to improve practice. The local authority had sought people's views on the support and practice of newly qualified social workers, which was mostly positive.

In Autumn 2023, the local authority had completed a 360-degree survey of newly qualified social workers and ASYE practitioners to gain their feedback on the ASYE. Eight responders reported their experience overall had been positive but suggested improvements to protected time to learn, and to allow more focus on equality and diversity issues. Further feedback from this survey indicated it was difficult to give newly qualified staff protected caseloads due to wider work pressures.

The local authority had a continuous improvement plan for their social work ASYE, which they submitted to Skill for Care for external moderation. The ASYE programme had a framework for supporting equality diversity and inclusion, and for portfolios to be shared electronically to support practice education. The local authority identified they needed to use feedback to improve the programme.

Improvements to ensure there were processes in place for when things went wrong were needed. Senior leaders acknowledged better communication was needed with providers and people who accessed support. The local authority conducted 'stay interviews' to check in with the workforce around why they chose to stay working for Medway, and to identify areas of improvement which might result in staff staying employed for longer. Interviews were anonymised, and a report had been produced by the Performance Information Board with themes and trends. The objective of the interviews was to gather the input often provided in an exit interview before it is too late.

Furthermore, the local authority had recently developed an Adult Social Care Engagement Plan which was underpinned by Think Local Act Personal's model of co-production. This plan recognised the local authority needed to improve how they engaged with local people when making decisions about services. The first 12 months actions in the engagement plan were to identify and gain feedback from people receiving services, providers, staff, and partners.

Leaders encouraged reflection and collective problem-solving. Senior leaders we spoke to told us the visibility of the leadership team was important and had therefore held "meet the team days" with adult social care, public health, and family hubs to see practice, and meet the frontline staff.

The Director of People facilitated staff drop-in sessions, allowing staff to have opportunities to feedback. Likewise, senior leaders also told us they had introduced the 'Medway Matters' forum to give local people the opportunity to attend and give feedback on any concerns they had. The impact these forums had on practice improvement had not yet been analysed.

Data from the Local Government Social Care Ombudsman showed 50% of complaints were upheld, however any recommendations for remedies were not always carried out in a timely way. In the last 12 months, 4 detailed investigations had been undertaken. Of those, 3 had incidents of late compliance.

A common theme identified in the complaints was a delay in assessments, including financial assessments and carers assessment. An unpaid carer we spoke to told us they had recently raised a complaint with the adult social care team due to a social worker who they felt did not respect the family's desire to explore supported living as a long-term goal. The unpaid carer received an apology from the local authority and was allocated a different social work at their request in a timely fashion.

The local authority had appointed an engagement manager gathering feedback from people in receipt of care and support to drive improvement. Feedback forms had been developed for staff to give to people at face to face visits.

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