



Arolygiaeth Gofal a Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol Cymru
Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales

National Inspection Safeguarding and Care Planning of looked after children and care leavers, who exhibit vulnerable or risky behaviours

Inspection of Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council

August 2014

1.0. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. This report provides an overview of inspection findings in respect of:
Safeguarding and care planning of looked after children and care leavers who exhibit vulnerable or risky behaviour, within Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council.
- 1.2. The inspection was carried out as part of Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW) national thematic inspection programme. The methodology for the review included three and a half days fieldwork in each local authority across Wales, between January and May 2014.
- 1.3. The aim of the national inspection was to assess the quality of care planning across Wales and whether it effectively:
 - Supports and protects looked after children and care leavers;
 - Identifies and manages the vulnerabilities and risky behaviour of looked after children and care leavers;
 - Promotes rights based practice and the voice of the child;
 - Promotes improved outcomes for looked after children and care leavers;
 - Promotes compliance with policy and guidance
- 1.4. Findings from the individual local authority inspections will inform a CSSIW national overview report to be published later this year.

2. THE INSPECTION

- 2.1 The inspection focused on the work undertaken with looked after children over eleven years of age and care leavers who were identified as being vulnerable and/or involved in risky behaviours, against defined criteria.
- 2.2 It is important to recognise that given this focus the case sample reviewed in each local authority encompassed some of the most challenging and complex case management issues and represented only a small cohort of each authority's wider looked after children and care leaving population.
- 2.3 As well as inspecting cases in respect of the assessment, care planning and review systems the inspection also considered the extent to which the corporate parenting, management and partnership arrangements acted to promote improved outcomes for looked after children and care leavers. Also how organisational structures including, workforce, resources, advocacy and quality assurance mechanisms impacted on the quality of care planning.

The inspection considered these areas against the following five questions.

A summary of our findings is presented below

QUESTION 1

Did the authority effectively discharge its corporate parenting roles and responsibilities promoting the stability, welfare and safety of looked after children and care leavers?

POSITIVES

- The corporate parenting arrangements in this authority were well embedded. Members understood their roles and responsibilities. Looked after children and care leavers had been identified as a corporate priority. Both members and senior officers' demonstrated ambition for looked after children evidenced by commitment to supporting academic achievement.
- Partnership arrangements facilitated gathering and sharing of reliable information. The authority and strategic partners had formal and informal mechanisms in place that enabled a good understanding of both the immediate and individual needs of looked after children and care leavers engaged in risky behaviours, as well as an aggregated profile. This facilitated resource planning to meet their needs now and in the future. The authority also had mechanisms in place to seek the views and opinions of children/young people about their care, such as the Rainbow Group, a focus group that represented the views of looked after children and care leavers. Some members of this group were delegates at the Corporate Parenting Board and were also able to bring issues to the leadership team to inform service planning.
- We heard that all managers were visible and accessible. We saw evidence that senior officers had systems in place, such as the Multi-Agency Prevention & Permanency Panel and the Multi-agency Placement Panel, to maintain oversight of children and young people who were placed out of county and/or were presenting specific concerns.
- The authority appeared to have sufficient volume of suitably skilled and experienced staff working with looked after children and care leavers. Despite some workload demands this staff group conveyed commitment, enthusiasm and motivation to undertake the work they carried out.
- The Cwm Taff Children's Safeguarding Board had a range of systems in place to gather and share information including in respect of looked after children and care leavers which underpin multi-agency working. Specifically the Board had developed/reviewed a range of joint protocols/policies with a view to streamlining these into a Risky Behaviours Protocol and had recently

established a Risky Behaviours Task and Finish Group that was developing multi-agency risk assessments and plans.

- There were generally resilient and supportive relationships within social services and with partners to ensure looked after children and care leavers, including those who live away from their home authority, had access to services that met their needs.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- Members did not provide sufficient challenge to ensure the best outcomes were achieved for looked after children and care leavers, including the most vulnerable and challenging. Nor were they sufficiently well assured that strategic aims in respect of this group of service users were effectively owned and translated into action across the authority or by partners.
- The range and choice of placements able to meet the assessed needs and promote good outcomes for looked after children and care leavers involved in risky behaviours was not sufficiently comprehensive. This was evidenced by the numerous placement moves experienced by some children and young people.
- Despite good operational engagement the resilience of the authority's relationship with health services remain overtly dependent on children's social services providing funding and resources to assess and meet the therapeutic needs of looked after children and care leavers in many cases.
- Arrangements for supporting care leavers in their transition to adulthood were not generally aspirational. Ineffective support and encouragement to access and sustain engagement with available universal services and gaps in service provision particularly appropriate supported accommodation hampered ongoing engagement with young adults. We noted the authority's recognition of this deficit and it's willingness to participate as a pioneer authority in the Welsh Government's "When I am Ready" Scheme as a positive commitment toward improving the life chances for care leavers in future.

QUESTION 2

Were care and pathway plans informed by relevant assessments, including explicit risk assessments, which supported a comprehensive response to the needs and experiences of children and young people?

POSITIVES

- In general information sharing arrangements between teams and between agencies were in place that facilitated timely referrals and prompt responses when issues concerning risky behaviours were raised.
- The authority was ambitious for looked after children and care leavers in terms of education/training. This was evidenced within Personal Education Plans on

files. We also saw examples of young people being supported in education despite obstacles and of care leavers being encouraged and supported to access training opportunities to develop their employment related skills.

- We observed that interventions from the authority's Gellideg Family Centre, a project able to undertake direct work with looked after children and care leavers, was in some cases able to compensate for lack of Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) provision.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- Care and pathway plans did not routinely include relevant *shared* assessments of need or robust analysis. Where more than one agency was involved with the same child or young person, planning for risk management was not co-ordinated well.
- The quality of the care plans was variable. Most plans clearly articulated overarching objectives but very few of these were outcome focussed or clear about how risk was to be managed, within what timescales or by whom. The care plans of those children and young people who were looked after for long periods were often reliant on informal information exchange between professionals rather than updated written assessments. This was even in circumstances where there had been significant change. Few care plans explicitly included the child or young persons views nor had plans routinely been effectively shared with children and/or their families
- There was an insufficient suitable supply of appropriate placements and move-on accommodation in this authority. It was acknowledged that despite the range of foster placements available both within and outside of authority boundaries, carers did not always have the skills to effectively safeguard the most complex and vulnerable children and young people nor was there a sufficient level of support for them to achieve this. We noted some joint work was planned to enhance the skills of foster carers and to better equip them to care for more challenging children/young people.
- There was a significant gap in appropriate services to meet the emotional and psychological health and development needs of some children and young people, including those associated with risky behaviours thus creating an over-reliance on social services. Specifically there is a recognised longstanding disconnect between the access threshold applied by CAMHS and the presenting emotional resilience needs of looked after children and care leavers. We saw extensive waiting lists for CAMHS with some children and young people not receiving a service to address an assessed therapeutic need at all.

QUESTION 3

Were operational systems and procedures in place that ensured responsive coordinated action was taken to mitigate risk and achieve safe continuity of care?

POSITIVES

- We recognised the commitment, skills and knowledge of staff at all levels. Most of the social work staff we interviewed had a good understanding of the needs and vulnerabilities of looked after children and care leavers. There was an embedded learning culture in this authority and a wide range of training opportunities were available to staff.
- The authority had promoted a strong focus on risk assessment and management for looked after children and care leavers. We saw evidence from case reviews and interviews with professionals that staff were aware of their statutory responsibilities and risk management policies and procedures, such as strategy meetings, multi-agency panels, case conferences and return to placement checks and that these mechanisms were utilised promptly and appropriately to co-ordinate relevant safeguarding strategies.
- We heard from staff that all managers were accessible. Staff also told us that they received regular formal supervision and that managers were available for informal discussion and/or consultation/decision making regarding safeguarding issues. Supervision was reported to be of sufficient quality with a good balance between reflective practice and personal/professional development being achieved.
- Workforce arrangements supported the recruitment and retention of qualified social workers to meet the needs of looked after children and young people.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- Discussion with staff and team managers suggested casework consultation about risk issues, including decision-making took place however we saw very little evidence on case files to support this.
- Children and young people said that social workers were often late for appointments and/or difficult to contact; they cited pressure of workload as the reason for this. Social workers also told us that workload pressures sometimes hampered them implementing a more 'person-centred' or motivational approach to working with children and young people and their families.

QUESTION 4

Did Independent Reviews and quality assurance arrangements promote safe care and best outcomes for young people?

POSITIVES

- The authority's arrangements for Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) were compliant with statutory guidance. Communications between team managers, social workers and IRO appeared constructive.
- Looked after children review meetings took place in a timely manner and were generally well attended by other professionals and families. We also saw evidence of the authority's commitment to sustaining consistency of IRO for individual children and young people and of consultation with children/young people prior to review meetings. IROs made efforts to visit some children in placement prior to meetings particularly if for first reviews and/or where there were concerns or complexities relating to the care plans.
- IROs told us they were confident to challenge and a disputes resolution policy was in place if needed. Social workers and team managers experienced review meetings as challenging; they reported that care plans were rigorously reviewed and that they were held to account for any changes.
- Well established performance monitoring arrangements were in place as were reporting pathways to the Corporate Parenting Board in respect of key performance indicators relating to looked after children and care leavers.
- We saw evidence of performance monitoring arrangements that helped to maintain an effective oversight on practice and drive improvement. These included quarterly case-file audits; thematic audits; team case discussions; group supervision; and on-going improvements to relevant documentation.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- Social workers from Adult Services rarely attended the Pathway Plan review meetings for care leavers likely to be transitioning to their service.
- The frequency of tracking between review meetings by IROs was insufficient to ensure actions were completed and as such did not enhance the review process or help counter drift. IROs in this authority reported that they were hampered in achieving this by lack of access to relevant ICT systems.
- Some children and young people attended reviews but most of those we spoke to reported discomfort and/or embarrassment and preferred not to go. The reasons for this were often linked to the number of professionals attending the meeting and a perception that although they were invited to express their views these contributions weren't valued.

- Commissioning arrangements for children's services were underdeveloped. Where services had been commissioned, monitoring arrangements were generally confined to contractual matters rather than focussed on broader quality assurance metrics based around outcomes for children/young people.

QUESTION 5

Did care and pathway planning effectively capture and promote the rights and voice of the child?

POSITIVES

- Professionals, including contributors from the 3rd sector, within this authority were committed to helping children and young people understand their lives, including the impact of their journey, through the care system. We saw evidence in case files of direct work being undertaken with children and young people to help them understand their identity and the changes they have experienced. We particularly recognised the interventions of the Gellideg Family Centre as providing flexible and imaginative support to children and young people.
- Care leavers aged over 18 years valued the responsiveness and support of the Future Care Service (3rd sector provision of Personal Advisors).
- The authority had developed formal advocacy arrangements that ensured looked after children had access to appropriate support and had an effective voice. We heard that where the service was used that it was highly valued by staff as well as children and young people (although this was rarely evident on case file recording).
- We learned from discussions with children and young people that generally they experienced professionals as persistent in their efforts to engage them and to ensure their voices were heard and that problems were resolved satisfactorily.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- Limitations on placement choice, including appropriate move-on accommodation for care leavers, for looked after children and young people with the most challenging and complex needs, frequently militated against meeting the child or young person's wishes and feelings and simultaneously keeping them safe.
- Arrangements for the allocation of and support for Personal Advisors for 16 – 18 year olds were unclear and inconsistent. We did not see any evidence of support for this age group from Personal Advisors. For those care leavers reaching 18 years arrangements were clearer it was however disappointing that the 3rd sector provider of Personal Advisors for over 18's were not routinely involved in developing Pathway Plans for the young people they were about to start working with.

- Planning in relation to involvement in sporting leisure and/or other community based activities was inconsistent but did include some good examples of children and young people being pro-actively supported to pursue their interests. We also saw examples of opportunities offered but these not being taken up.