



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 Blaenau Gwent 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 Blaenau Gwent County 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 council had been focussed on corporate financial management and education services over the past twelve months. Elected members supported improvements in services for vulnerable looked after children and were knowledgeable about issues they faced.
- Senior officers were well informed about individual vulnerability and risky behaviours of looked after young people and could direct resources where they were most needed. There were systems in place to share this information across partner agencies, and evidence of good practice in relation to managing risk for missing children and young people.
- Children's services had identified placement stability as a priority. There had also been a recent restructure of field teams to support continuity for looked after children and young people.
- The authority had arrangements in place to ensure access to education and primary health services. There was systematic reporting of out of county placements which could be extended to include vulnerability and risk profile of the looked after children's population.
- The regional South East Wales Safeguarding Children's board had been in place since April 2013 and had developed a comprehensive strategic plan. Priorities had been agreed with 'Adolescents who exhibit harmful behaviours' planned as a focus for 2014/15. This development included significant key actions which could be expanded to include risky behaviours in addition to those of child exploitation and missing young people.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- The authority had identified that corporate parenting was not embedded across the council. There was recognition that there needed to be a focus on how improved outcomes were to be delivered. The work of the panel should be reviewed to ensure that it's responsibilities are being discharged and that meeting the needs of looked after children is a priority for the authority. There had been no opportunities for elected members to have direct contact with this group of service users to assure themselves that they are receiving the support they needed.
- The profile of looked after children's vulnerability and risky behaviours was not collated and shared across partner agencies and so was not available for the joint planning.

Specialist services especially in relation to emotional well being and therapeutic needs were not being provided in a timely way. A joint social services and health commissioning board across the Gwent authorities had not been established long enough at the time of the inspection to evidence any improvements in the provision of these services.

- The current Placement strategy did not include an analysis of the needs of looked after children and young people. There was no projection of future demand especially in relation to leaving care services and it did not outline what actions the authority had planned to manage future need.
- The terms of reference for the complex needs panel should be re-visited to ensure membership is at an appropriate level to support timely decision making and avoid delays in providing necessary therapeutic services and placements.

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

- Information sharing arrangements were effective between workers and teams, including the Youth Offending Service. There was a clear shared understanding and commitment from staff to safeguard young people and improve their outcomes. Workers interviewed were experienced in managing risk and were familiar with the process in place.
- Care leavers were positive about the support they received especially from their personal advisors. There was good preparation for independent living including a creative scheme developed to support young people's budget management.
- The authority had identified the need to increase the range of placements available especially for those young people with challenging behaviour and additional needs.
- The education and health support workers for looked after children were flexible and effective in promoting better outcomes despite Education services being in 'special measures'.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- Risk assessments seen recorded little analysis, did not outline what action was needed to mitigate those risks identified, or whether they had been shared appropriately. It was not evident that young people had been engaged in their assessment or were aware that it had been completed. There was some inconsistency in the arrangements with partner agencies in agreement around levels of risk. Staff reported that working with partner agencies to manage risk could be a challenge.

- Core assessments seen were not routinely updated and did not reflect the current needs of looked after young people.
- Care plans seen did identify what services were needed to support young people but these were not always provided in a timely way. There was significant delay in accessing specialist services; this was a particular concern where a young person had been engaged in sexually harmful behaviour. There was very little availability of therapeutic services for looked after children. This had a serious impact on the opportunity for them to develop the necessary resilience to make and sustain positive social relationships and maximise educational and employment opportunities as they approached adulthood, especially for those who had suffered serious neglect.

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

- There has been a stable workforce in place and there appeared to be good resilience to the recent restructure. Although there had been changes and capacity issues at management level, workers were able to access informal and regular formal supervision and reported good support for their practice and training. Staff had the opportunity to participate in a weekly rolling programme of practitioner learning events.
- Social workers had access to appropriate policies and procedures and were clear that safeguarding was a priority. It was evident that there was good identification and awareness of the risks to and vulnerability of looked after young people.
- There is a monthly task group in place to monitor permanency which includes consideration of any risk assessments. Partner agencies were not systematically included which reduced the effectiveness of sharing concerns and joint planning to maximise the reduction of possible harm.
- The missing children's service which included the five Gwent authorities had significant potential to improve the outcomes for vulnerable looked after young people who go missing. The service was undergoing evaluation at the time of the inspection having been in place since April 2013.
- There was a system in place to capture looked after young people's progress in education. It was not clear how this information was used to help inform personal education plans.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- The financial restraints across the council had impacted on the timeliness of recruitment within children's services. Should the number of vacancies increase this delay has the potential to impact negatively on performance and the effectiveness of safeguarding.
- Child protection processes were being used to manage risk for young people. However decision making was not clearly recorded when the likelihood of significant harm was established and other arrangements were agreed. There was a lack of co-ordination across services and improvement in multi-agency planning to manage risk is required.
- Some partnership arrangements were described as resource led and inspectors saw examples where young people had been waiting to receive specialist services over a significant period of time. There should be multi-agency agreement in relation to how corporate parenting responsibilities should be met.
- Looked after young people were unhappy about the frequent changes in social worker which had also been identified by the authority through consultation. Both staff and young people acknowledged that there was not enough time spent on building relationships and to carry out direct work. It was not evident how the move to generic casework would give social workers more capacity and the situation should be reviewed in a timely way to ensure that the aims are being achieved.

QUESTION 4

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

POSITIVES

- The authority's independent reviewing arrangements were compliant with guidance. Reviews seen were timely and ensured that care plans were updated. Despite high caseloads Independent Reviewing Officers (I.R.O.) were well informed and committed to ensuring that looked after young people were involved in their reviews and had an opportunity to have their say.
- Review reports seen were thorough and included consideration of the effectiveness of the plan.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- I.R.Os felt confident to challenge arrangements for young people and social workers and managers confirmed this was the case. However this was difficult to evidence and inspectors saw examples of situations which had not been resolved despite the issues being raised appropriately. Consideration should be given to how challenges brought by I.R.O.s could be evidenced and how outcomes are influenced.

- There were quality assurance arrangements in place but a lack of capacity had impacted on the effectiveness of the system to influence improvements.
- Commissioning arrangements for children's services were underdeveloped. Where services had been commissioned, monitoring arrangements were generally confined to contractual matters rather than quality assurance.

QUESTION 5

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

POSITIVES

- The authority had commissioned a consultation with the looked after children population and had responded to the concerns raised by children and young people about frequent changes of social worker and placement moves. There was also recognition that social workers did not have the capacity to complete direct work so the field work teams had been restructured in an effort to improve this situation. These arrangements had not been in place long enough at the time of the inspection to assess the outcome of the changes.
- The authority had identified placement stability as a priority aiming to improve the likelihood that children and young people are able to form secure and maintain secure attachments with the adults caring for them.
- The advocacy arrangements were well developed and monitored. There was evidence that the service was discussed at each looked after children review. All service users seen during the inspection were aware of the service and those who had used it were positive about the outcomes.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- Young people described a lack of proactive social work support and made complaints about missed appointments and poor timekeeping. Care leavers were able to compare this level of service with what they felt was the very good communication and responsiveness they currently experienced from their personal advisors. Whilst the authority had responded to these issues by restructuring it was not clear how this would improve the social workers capacity to provide a more timely and responsive support to looked children and young people. The monitoring and review of looked after children should include ensuring that the new arrangements are achieving the intended outcomes.
- While young people were able to participate in sporting and leisure activities they were unhappy about the length of time taken to get consent for school trips and overnight stays. Senior officers were aware of these difficulties with delegated responsibilities for foster carers but these issues remained outstanding at the time of the inspection.

- Looked after young people were clear that they would welcome the opportunity to meet together to share views and offer support to each other.