



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 Ceredigion County 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 Ceredigion 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

- Children's services were recognised as a corporate priority. The corporate parenting arrangements were embedded and elected members were well informed and knowledgeable about issues facing looked after children and care leavers.
- We saw clear leadership and a positive ethos within the management team. The recent transformation of council structures appeared to have improved effectiveness of communication as well as reinforced a culture of openness and cross-service support; "think team Ceredigion". Examples of this were, the quarterly inter-departmental leadership challenge meetings including key elected members that focussed on effective use of budgetary resources across service boundaries; as well as co-operation between housing, planning and children's services departments in respect of foster care accommodation.
- Partnership arrangements facilitated gathering and sharing information about many of the potential risks posed by looked after children and care leavers. Senior officers were well informed about individual looked after children's vulnerability and risky behaviours and could direct resources accordingly. There were systems in place to share information across partner agencies for example the multi-agency Complex Needs Case Planning & Funding Forum.
- We heard that all managers were visible and accessible and that the authority had systems in place that supported active oversight of compliance in respect of its statutory responsibilities for looked after children and care leavers.
- The authority had prioritised recruitment and retention of social workers over recent years and had finalised job evaluations in respect of Personal Advisors. These activities alongside the approach to 'growing their own' social workers, through traineeships and secondments as well as the Porth Agored partnership with Trinity St David's University to develop the Certificate for Consolidation of Social Work Practice appear to have resulted in a sufficient volume of suitably skilled and experienced staff working with looked after children and care leavers. Staff and managers we spoke to conveyed commitment, enthusiasm and motivation to undertake the work they carried out.

- The Safeguarding Children’s Board (SCB) was in the process of moving to a regional footprint. The local SCB was linked to the regional but remained focussed on local safeguarding arrangements, stressing the significance of locally forged relationships and the importance of retaining those. The business plan had recently prioritised vulnerable groups such as looked after children and young people who had had more than three placement moves.
- Generally there were resilient and supportive relationships within social services and with partners to ensure looked after children and care leavers, had access to services that met their needs. We noted Education Directorate investment in a post focussed on the looked after children population and Housing Directorate pro-activity in relation to advising Children’s Services of available vacancies. Arrangements were in place to ensure that looked after children had access to education and primary health services.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- The effectiveness of service planning and identification of gaps in service provision could have benefited from a collated profile of children and young people presenting with risky behaviours and/or complex and challenging needs being shared across partner agencies.
- We did not see evidence of systems to evaluate the effectiveness of the authority’s placement strategy. Current documentation did not include a contemporary analysis of the needs of looked after children or care leavers nor did it outline what actions the authority had planned to manage future need. We noted however the draft “Market Position Statement re Looked After Children 2013” as a positive step towards addressing this deficit.
- 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.
- Lack of clear strategic arrangements, combined with gaps in provision, including appropriate move-on accommodation, did not facilitate a clear pathway for care leavers to access and/or sustain commitment to universal (adult) services. This hampered on-going engagement with young adults.
- Although the authority had some good mechanisms in place to seek the views and opinions of children/young people about their care, for example the Looked After Children Forum and the Give Us Support group we saw little evidence of how feedback was used to plan and develop future services.

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

- Referral and information sharing arrangements between teams, including the Youth Justice Service, were effective. There was clearly a shared understanding and commitment from all professionals to safeguarding children and young people and to improving outcomes for them. Interviews with staff and case file reviews evidenced that information sharing, both formal and informal between professionals, in particular concerning risk issues, was generally timely and responses were prompt.
- Multi-agency case planning meetings provided a mechanism for ensuring that care planning included relevant *shared* assessments of need in many cases.
- The authority and partners were ambitious for looked after children and care leavers in terms of their education/training. Education had introduced the Hafan and Encil approach which places more responsibility on schools to sustain children in school and develop support systems around them rather than to exclude. We also noted the Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) project that focussed on developing occupational outcomes, such as apprenticeships or entry into further education colleges aimed at care leavers. Additionally we saw examples of children and young people being supported to sustain school attendance despite significant obstacles such as placement moves, through joint funding of taxis.
- We noted the positive relationships and regular constructive information exchange between private sector housing providers, local authority housing services and children's services in relation to tenancy requirements for care leavers and property vacancies.
- Social workers told us that the work of the looked after children education workers and the looked after children's nurse was highly valued. Generally these workers were proactively involved in assessment and planning for looked after children evidenced by up to date personal education and health plans on files.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- The quality of 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. Not all care plans explicitly included the child or young person's views nor had all plans routinely been effectively shared with children and/or their families.

- There was a significant gap in appropriate services to meet the emotional, 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.
- There was an insufficient suitable supply of appropriate placements. It was acknowledged that despite a range of possible placements these were not always appropriate to safeguard the most vulnerable children and young people. Nor was there sufficient support currently available to equip and support carers to care for those children and young people who presented with the most complex and risky behaviours. We noted the recent development of the Specialist Foster Care Scheme as an initiative with potential to partially redress this deficit.
- Availability of supported and unsupported accommodation for care leavers appeared to be over-stretched. The situation was exacerbated by the rurality of the area making the logistics of having the most appropriate placements available in the right places at the right time extremely challenging.

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 was a stable workforce in place and we recognised the commitment, skills and knowledge of staff at all levels. The social work staff we interviewed had a good understanding of the needs and vulnerabilities of looked after children and care leavers.
- Workers were clear that safeguarding was a priority. We saw evidence from case reviews and interviews with professionals that staff were aware of their statutory responsibilities. Relevant mechanisms were utilised promptly and appropriately to co-ordinate safeguarding strategies.
- Workforce arrangements supported the recruitment and retention of staff.

- Staff told us that they received regular formal supervision and had access to training to support their practice. We noted 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.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- Risk assessments and on-going risk management arrangements, particularly when more than one agency was involved, needed to be more effectively recorded, shared and coordinated.
- Discussion with staff and team managers suggested casework consultation about risk issues, including decision-making took place however we saw little evidence on case files to support this.

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 and managers expressed confidence in the IRO team.
- Looked after children review meetings took place in a timely manner, were generally well attended by other professionals and ensured that care plans were updated. We noted the routine continuation of pathway plan reviews despite disengagement from some care leavers in preparation for subsequent re-engagement.
- Well established performance monitoring arrangements were in place as were reporting pathways to SCB, senior management, scrutiny committees, the corporate parenting board and multi agency monitoring group in respect of key performance indicators relating to looked after children and care leavers.
- We heard that quality assurance arrangements were in place, which included quarterly monitoring meetings that brought together the IRO service, education, health and children's services team managers to identify and oversee improvement activities in relation to arrangements for looked after children. A

recent lack of capacity within the IRO team had hampered further development of effective systems that could influence improvement.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- IRO told us they were confident to challenge arrangements for children and young people although this was difficult to evidence from the case files we reviewed.
- Effective preparation for review meetings was sometimes hampered by late/poor quality documentation from social workers. Frequency of tracking between review meetings by IRO was insufficient to ensure actions were completed and as such did not enhance the review process or help to counter drift.
- We saw evidence of the authority's commitment to consultation prior to review meetings but children and young people's response to the paper consultation was generally poor. The children and young people we spoke to told us that they preferred not to attend their reviews as these meetings made them feel embarrassed and uncomfortable. For this group of children, the reason was often linked to a perception that although they were invited to express their views these contributions were not valued.
- Commissioning arrangements for children's services were underdeveloped.

QUESTION 5

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

POSITIVES

- Professionals within this authority were committed to helping children and young people understand their lives, including the impact of their journey, through the care system.
- The authority's placement strategy recognised the importance of helping looked after children and care leavers to maintain secure attachments. We saw evidence from case files of commitment to arranging and sustaining contact between families sometimes in the face of significant obstacles. Moreover, most of the children and young people we spoke to said they felt respected and treated fairly by their social workers.
- The authority had well developed formal advocacy arrangements that ensured looked after children had access to appropriate support and had an effective voice. The children and young people we spoke to knew about the advocacy

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service and about how to access it. We heard from children and young people, as well as staff 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).

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- Limitations on placement choice, for children and young people presenting with the most challenging and complex needs, especially appropriate move-on accommodation for care leavers, sometimes militated against meeting the child or young person's wishes and feelings whilst simultaneously keeping them safe.
- Generally children and young people reported good relationships with social workers. However, some children and young people said they found them difficult to contact, late for appointments and slow to respond to messages. They also raised issues about the lack of timeliness and inconsistency of some management decisions; for example in relation to consent and funding.