



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

Performance Evaluation Report 2013–14

Rhondda Cynon Taf County
Borough Council Social Services

October 2014

**This report sets out the key areas of progress and areas
for improvement in Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council
Social Services for the year 2013–14**

Annual Review and Evaluation of Performance 2013 - 2014

Local Authority: Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council

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Summary

Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT) council effectively balanced its overall budget for social services in 2013-14. The authority spends more on social care per head than many other Welsh authorities although this is in the context of relatively high levels of deprivation. The council has outlined realistic savings and has demonstrated strategic financial planning to meet current and future budgetary pressures. In adult services, advances have been made in reshaping service provision. Further change in adult service provision plus an anticipated remodelling of children's services are planned for 2015-16. This is planned to align services to the requirements of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act ('the Act') and as a response to the current economic challenges.

The council has mature relationships with the local health board and the neighbouring council of Merthyr Tydfil. This has allowed for an increase in collaborative working and commissioning in several areas of adult and children's services and will be expanded further in 2014-15 and beyond. This is not without its challenges and the director acknowledges that the pace of change must increase in some areas.

The council has a wide ranging strategy to promote the Welsh language and was the locality used for the launch of 'More than just Words'.

Workforce capacity issues remain in children's services and this report highlights the continued use of unqualified workers to case manage and complete initial assessments. Children's services has seen an increase in referrals, a relatively high looked after population and the highest recorded number of young people on the child protection register from any council in Wales. The timely completion of assessments in both adult and children's services is poor and will affect the effectiveness of support and preventative work with vulnerable people and families. The council has identified that greater quality assurance of assessment and care management would improve service provision across social services. The assessment and support of carers (young carers and adult carers), deteriorated this year. The council states it will consider these areas for improvement as part of its overall review of services to ensure all change promotes the priorities dictated in

the Act. The council has strong corporate parenting arrangements and improvements have been noted in the educational achievement of looked after children leaving school.

Response to last year's areas of improvement

Area for improvement identified last year	Progress in 2013 - 14
Developing a forward looking strategy for older people which is sustainable in the face of increasing demand	The council is working in partnership to deliver on the 'Integrated assessment, planning and review arrangements for older people (2013)'.
Ongoing implementation of the children's commissioning strategy	The council continues to host the '4C's' framework, has contracted with a provider to increase the options for residential accommodation and has reduced the use of out of area residential placements.
Performance around some aspects of assessments relating to children's services remains an area for continued improvement for the third consecutive year	This continues to be a significant issue for the council. The percentage of initial assessments completed within 7 days fell further from 51.7% to 48.9%.
The council needs to introduce an appropriate system within its registered services to ensure that information required by regulations is readily available to managers and inspectors	The council reports this has been addressed and will be tested via further inspection.
Waiting lists for adaptations should be reduced	The waiting list has been reduced by 600.
Continue to monitor and address the high number of children that are looked after in the council	This remains high, despite specific efforts by the council to reduce it. In the last 3 years, this has increased from 594 children to 650 594-650.
Achieving compliance identified in the fostering service inspection report	Three areas of non compliance were identified at inspection; these were not issued as notices (technical non compliance).
Better communication between frontline	Some improvements seen. But there is

teams in children's services to clarify roles and functions particularly around preventative services	still more to be done.
Ensuring all children on the child protection register have an allocated social worker	Identified as a priority by the council and achieved.
Ensuring looked after children have an allocated social worker	This has not improved. In 2013-14 30% of looked after children are allocated to an unqualified worker

Visits and inspections undertaken during the year

- National review of commissioning in adult care.
- Meeting with head of adult services to discuss new operating model.
- National inspection of safeguarding and care planning of looked after children and care leavers who exhibit vulnerable or risky behaviours ('looked after children inspection').
- CSSIW met with senior officers via quarterly engagement meetings to review performance and progress against areas identified in the 2012-13 performance evaluation.

Areas for follow up by CSSIW next year

- The council's understanding of and response to the increase in child protection registration.
- Adult safeguarding arrangements.
- Review of themes arising from regulatory involvement in adult care homes.
- CSSIW will contribute to a WAO led review to examine whether councils are effectively supporting older people to live independently, including through joined up working across health and social care.

Performance

Shaping services

Rhondda Cynon Taf is a relatively deprived part of Wales, with a higher proportion of people in receipt of benefits than the Welsh average and more than a third of its local wards included in the 20% most deprived areas. There is a higher rate of disability and teenage conceptions than the Welsh average. The council allocates a comparatively high spend per head of population to its social services budget.

The council's social services continue to have strong corporate support in the face of an unprecedented funding gap for 2014-15 and beyond. The Single Integrated Plan (SIP) was approved by members in May 2013 and outlines the vision that all people in RCT are 'healthy, safe and prosperous'. It includes priorities for children and families to receive early intervention and support to meet their needs and that adults are able to live independent and fulfilled lives.

The Wales Audit Office's (WAO) Annual Improvement Report (July 2014) considers that the council has identified clear improvement priorities for the next three years, but that the scale of improvements and target setting is less well laid out. The director's report warns that eligibility criteria for access to children and adult services is being reviewed and that swifter progress is required to achieve increased diversion to prevention and early intervention services.

The council was the locality used for the launch of 'More than just words' and the council's annual report to the Welsh language commissioner (June 2014) clearly outlines a range of staff training, monitoring and service initiatives to promote the use of Welsh and access to Welsh speaking facilities. There are also some inconsistencies identified in the provision of resources for Welsh language training across the staff group as a whole.

Adults

As in other parts of Wales, the council is seeing a steady increase of its older population which places additional pressures on adult social services. The budget for adult services was overspent in 2013-14 and this is regarded as unsustainable in future years. Clear plans for efficiency savings and service cuts have been identified following a widespread public consultation. A revised operating model was introduced in April 2013 and has ensured the council is better aligned with the health board to facilitate increased integrated working. The council has a good, well established relationship with the local health board.

The second phase of the revised operating model will be introduced in 2014-15, including charging for services. This model is aligned to the care and support element of the Act. The council has maintained its use of the widest eligibility criteria for adult services. This is subject to review by the council to reflect the intended increased availability and uptake of preventative services and supports within the community. Standardisation of eligibility criteria is proposed by Welsh Government to support the implementation of the Act. The challenges identified by the council are to develop a more outcome based approach and the full implementation of the integrated assessment, planning and review guidance that sets out the duties on health and social care services to provide integrated arrangements for assessment and care management for older people.

The Cwm Taf University Health Board, RCT and Merthyr Tydfil councils have set out in a statement of intent their proposals to further integrate services for older people with complex needs. However, the statement is less clear as to the scale and pace of change. The director's report acknowledges the need to accelerate collaborative commissioning of preventative services with the third sector. The Institute of Public Care (IPC) was asked to undertake a review of arrangements that support health and social care integration within Cwm Taf. IPC reported back in June 2013 and a partnership board and other groupings have been established to plan for and operationalise integrated working commensurate with the 2013 arrangements.

Adult services have a substantial agenda for 2014-15 which includes a review of assessment and care management services, reshaping services for people with learning difficulties, and reviews of adaptations/community equipment and services to people with sensory impairment. The council reports it is on track to complete this work by April 2015.

The council completed a self-assessment as part of the CSSIW national review of commissioning of adult care. There was recognition of areas to strengthen and develop, namely joint commissioning, greater focus on outcome based approaches and consultation with service users and other stakeholders. The WAO highlights a need for more citizen engagement around changes to service provision. The council has developed structures to facilitate the implementation of 'Together for mental health' across Cwm Taf.

The council has developed a short term intervention service that places greater emphasis on diversion to preventative services and scrutiny of referral criteria at initial contact. The director's report refers to a positive initial review of these developments. Eighty per cent of new referrals to the service are dealt with by short term services and a similar percentage is responded to within a day. There has been a reduction in the numbers of people experiencing delayed transfers of care (DTC) in 2013-14, from 109 people in 2011-12 to 84. While this is positive, the council accepts that these figures are small compared to the number of people discharged as a whole and therefore we should be cautious as to interpretation.

The council has invested in the expansion of its own provision of supported living schemes for adults with learning difficulties/ mental health issues and improved its commissioning of such in the independent sector, as a result of a planned reshaping in 2013-14. It has commissioned the building of new extra care places. The council has reduced the proportion of in-house domiciliary care services compared to those externally commissioned and considers this to be a more cost effective and responsive way of delivering care and support.

Children

During 2013-14 substantial progress has been made toward increased collaboration with Merthyr Tydfil in specific areas, for example a joint youth offending service has

been developed, joint Integrated Family Support Team (IFST) and joint safeguarding structures. The areas prioritised by the council for 21014-15 involve reducing statutory intervention with families by increasing the impact of prevention and early intervention services. Collaboration with three local authorities has resulted in a regional adoption service elements of which will become operational in November 2014 and will meet the requirements around the all Wales adoption service.

A new operating model for children's services is planned and will include re-modelling to improve assessment and care planning. Children's services were not significantly affected by cuts to services in 2013-14 and the council underspent slightly on an increased budget. The council has successfully reduced residential costs for children, including contracting with a private provider to increase the options in the local market. The council is host to the Cymraig Children's Commissioning Collaborative (4C's) framework which has negotiated preferred rates to an approved list of providers. The looked after children inspection found that the council's quality assurance was more focused on contractual fulfilment than outcomes for children. The council will review the arrangements in 2015 and indicates that it may wish to increase the commissioning function of the framework.

While the council has reduced numbers of children in residential placements, it aims to decrease these further, particularly for those in settings outside of the local area. The looked after children inspection advised that a greater range of placements should be identified to meet the specific and complex needs of some children. The council has commissioned a private provider, on a payment by results basis, to undertake recruitment and assessment of foster carers. This increases the capacity of social workers to undertake kinship care assessment and special guardianship orders.

The looked after children inspection found a lack of consistent consultation processes with children and young people to inform service planning. The council is a pilot for 'When I'm ready' that allows for care leavers to remain in foster placements. A task group has been established to meet the needs of those aged 16 plus, and deliver a specific service to this age group. This is identified as an area of further development and supports the council's wider commitment to improve support services for young service users, and care leavers in particular.

The new merged Cwm Taf Youth Offending Service will be fully established in October 2014. This will not release savings but should allow for sharing of skills and specialisms across the shared area.

Areas of progress

The council has:

- expanded supported living services;
- developed a regional adoption service and joint youth offending team; and
- piloted the 'When I'm ready' initiative for care leavers.

Areas for improvement

The council should:

- further develop an outcomes based approach in adult services;
- increase joint commissioning of adult prevention and early intervention services in adult services and thereby increase take up;
- increase the focus of children's services on early intervention and prevention services; and
- improve quality assurance of placements made via the 4Cs and increase its role in commissioning..

Getting help

The council recognises that improvements could be made to help the community get information about services. There are plans to develop a website in 2014-15 about adult social care. This will promote choice and independence by affording access to details of services and facilities. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) have suggested a dedicated website for looked after young people to similarly facilitate access to relevant information and to encourage ongoing contact between the young person and the IRO.

Adults

The Cwm Taf strategy for carers and action plan was launched in June 2013 and awareness raising activities undertaken along with staff training and the identification of carers' champions across agencies. This is likely to explain an increase in offers of assessment (particularly in the third quarter of the year), from 216 to 380. However, the number of actual assessments completed was not too dissimilar to 2012-13. We are unclear if this relates to carers not taking up offers of assessment or capacity issues within the team. In addition carers' needs are often considered as part of the assessment of the cared for person. Recording and consequent performance figures for carers can be unreliable. However, compared to other authorities, assessments of carers in their own right remains relatively low. The council will wish to assure itself by other means that is providing appropriate support to carers in line with its ambition to promote re-ablement and maintain people in their communities It should also revise process and practise such that reliable data is produced.

Less than half of people referred to adult locality teams receive an assessment within 14 days. The council state they are moving toward integrated assessments with health, although it has identified that further progress is required. The director highlights a decrease over the past three years in timely review of care plans and cites this as a

priority for the current year. The director indicates that further remodelling of adult services is being considered to address poor timescales.

The council has established first response teams in partnership with Merthyr Tydfil and single point of access teams. The council has reduced the waiting list for aids and adaptations by 600 people. It has achieved this by reducing the waiting time for the relevant occupational therapy assessment. The use of direct payments has not increased in 2013-14 as was expected. A pilot of a direct payments managed accounts scheme, using the existing external agency, has been established to see if this will increase uptake.

Children

There was a significant decrease from 97% to 58% for young carers known to social services who were provided with a service in 2013-14 compared to the previous year. The director attributes this to one staff post being temporarily vacant. Given the likely impact on young people, it is unfortunate that the post was not covered.

Almost three quarters of referrals proceeded to initial assessment and the council reports a 14% increase in referrals in 2013-14 and a consequent increase in initial assessments completed. This suggests that prevention and early intervention services are not reducing the use of initial assessments as a first response. As last year, the council performs well in providing initial decision making in 24 hours. Some inconsistency in decision making across the locality teams and child disability team has been acknowledged by the council.

There has been a slight decrease in the rate of unqualified staff completing initial assessments but, at one in five, this remains significantly above the Wales average. The proportion of initial assessments completed within time has decreased for the fifth year in succession and is now at 48.9%; compared to the Welsh average of 71.9%. The data received indicates that almost a third of children receiving an initial assessment are not seen as part of that assessment compared to a Wales average figure of 21%. The council state that substantially more children are seen as part of initial assessment, as this statistic refers to social workers. As indicated above, the council uses a greater than average number of unqualified staff to complete assessments. Additionally, the child is less likely to be seen on their own as part of that assessment, by a qualified worker, than they would be across Wales. There has been some improvement in the latter figure since 2012-13, in line with the all Wales trend.

Timeliness of core assessments completed within 35 working days declined to 80.4% in 2013-14, although the council's performance is now similar to the Wales average, where the general trend has been upward. The council has identified the quality of core assessments over the last three years as an area for improvement. The council will implement a single assessment format this year. Review will be of interest to ascertain if timely completion and quality are improved.

The looked after children inspection found a variable quality of care plans with little mention of outcomes or recorded revision due to changing needs / risk. While there was evidence of informal multi agency sharing of information between professionals, the resulting changes were not always documented on the care plan or risk assessments recorded. Care plans were often not shared with young people or their families. Pathway planning, however, was positively reviewed, particularly the involvement of young people in this process.

Independent reviewing officers (IROs) continued to chair a very high rate of reviews within timescale this year. The council highlights capacity issues, however, and doubts that it can sustain the current level of service quality. This is attributed to the widening of the IRO role to review children receiving short term breaks, subject to pathway plans, in receipt of IFST services and the first review at 18+ under 'When I'm ready'. This increase in caseload is identified by the IROs as a direct threat to their quality assurance role and to their capacity to follow up concerns about young people. The looked after children inspection also found that IRO's were not able to sufficiently follow up on matters between reviews. This will limit their ability to counter drift in the focus of practice and intervention with children and young people.

The council has a strong process for escalation of concerns by IROs, although the looked after children inspection observed that the process had been impeded at times due to the organisational structure at senior management level in children's services. In addition, the challenge process is likely to be affected if IROs have reduced capacity to raise issues. This is particularly significant due to the identified increased demand and staffing deficits in assessment and care planning services and where scrutiny and challenge is all the more important.

The director reports a welcome decrease in the waiting time for children to receive a disabled facilities grant. The council has shown commitment to advocacy for looked after children and those in the child protection process by commissioning an advocacy service. Regular meetings with senior management ensure monitoring of delivery and that issues and themes arising for young people are fed back at senior level.

Areas of progress

The council has:

- maintained timely looked after children reviews; and
- reduced waiting times for children's disabled facilities grants.

Areas for improvement

The council should:

- increase assessments of adult carers;

- increase assessments and support for young carers;
- complete more initial and core assessments within timescales; and
- review the capacity of the Independent Reviewing Team

The services provided

The council has a relatively large workforce to deliver social care services. It continues to directly provide a substantial proportion of the residential accommodation for children and older adults in the area

Adults

The council continues to support a significantly higher population of older people in the community than the Welsh average. This has decreased over the last three years, as has the Wales average. The number of older people in residential care has been largely static in RCT in the last three years and it remains the Welsh authority with the highest proportion of older people in residential care. Increased preventative services have not yet yielded the intended results of reducing those people receiving social services' support in the community or residential care..

The council maintains a high number of its own residential care homes for older people. This is not necessarily the most cost effective means to provide residential accommodation and a review of all in house services is in process. The council has expanded the Butterfly dementia project into another of its homes and received a very positive CSSIW inspection. Following the inspections of the council's own homes in 2014, we will review any emerging themes arising.

The council's commissioning priority is to increase nursing care capacity for older people with dementia in the area. This is in the context of a growing population of older people with nursing and complex needs across Wales and shortages of qualified nursing staff in the residential sector. Concerns identified by the council, health and CSSIW as to standards of care in some private care homes were emerging at the end of 2013-14 and have developed significantly in the current year. While the formal actions taken by all agencies is outside the timescale of this report, there was a significant decline in care standards in several private homes in the area. This resulted in concerns for the welfare of residents and presented a challenge to the council in identifying alternative placements.

Overall, a high proportion of adult service users in RCT under 65 years are supported in the community (97.8%), which has remained static in the last three years. A slightly higher proportion of adults with physical, sensory or learning disability is supported in residential care rather than the community compared to the Welsh average. However, people with mental health needs in RCT are somewhat more likely to be supported in the community than the Wales average.

Substance misuse assessment services were re organised with co-occurring social workers attached to the community mental health teams. Support to the locality teams comes from a social work team linked to the multi agency substance misuse team and a consultant social worker.

Financial restrictions have led to decisions to close some day services, although the council feels there remain sufficient resources in the community to meet needs.

Children

The council will review the early intervention and prevention services, namely Cwm Taf IFST, Team Around the Family (TAF) and the rapid response team in 2014-15, looking at outcomes and referral criteria. Clarity on remit and single point of access to teams may be of benefit. It will be important to consider early intervention and preventative services uptake and provision in parallel with the council's high looked after and child protection figures.

The council has made specific efforts to understand and respond to the factors influencing the rising numbers of children that it looks after. A similar split of three quarters young people accommodated 'in house' and one quarter 'out of county' has been maintained from the previous year.

Children and young people in the care system can expect timely use of care plans and less disruptions (school and placement moves) than their counterparts in some other areas in Wales. However, almost a third of these children are allocated to an unqualified worker. Senior managers are engaged in a workforce review and are anticipating a remodelling of children's services. As such, the council is not committing itself to a swift response, if such were available, but will consider allocation practise as part of these larger reviews.

Improvements could also be made to the timeliness of statutory visits to children (82.7%). Young people consulted during the looked after children inspection were aware of the pressures on social workers. They told us that social workers were often late and difficult to contact. They also said that the identity of their social worker frequently changed. CSSIW's inspection of children's services, published in May 2013, also highlighted good social work case management and a range of innovative local services. The more recent looked after children inspection identified some issues with quality and review of care plans, which the council had already identified as an area for improvement.

The council maintains four children's homes that are well managed settings with stable staff groups providing good quality care. The council maintains a relatively large fostering service, although approximately half of children are fostered via independent agencies. Our inspection of the council's fostering service identified an increase in children in kinship care and an expansion in the activity of the family link service for

children with disabilities. Some areas of non-compliance were identified and we were reassured these would be addressed; carers did query the level of support they received. It was too early to consider the contracting out in the fostering team (since January 2014) of recruitment and assessment of carers to the independent sector. We will be interested to consider the success of this arrangement at the next inspection.

The council is considering the Flying Start provision across eligible areas and in light of the expansion in 2013-14. The target for take up has not been met, although it is hoped a new placement officer will increase uptake. The council's decision to withdraw full time nursery education for 3 year olds resulted in strong objections from parents and a judicial review. The council intends to continue to attempt to implement this change.

Areas of progress

The council has:

- expanded the Butterfly project into another local authority care home; and
- maintained good standards of care in its own children's homes.

Areas for improvement

The council should:

- seek to increase EMI nursing capacity via commissioning;
- review the impact of preventative and early intervention services on statutory interventions with children and families; and
- Increase levels of qualified social workers allocated to looked after children.

Effect on people's lives

The multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) has been approved by all relevant local agencies. It will start work in 2015. It will undertake the initial decision with all adult and child referrals, with adult referrals being moved across to the MASH first. The timely joint screening of safeguarding referrals, information sharing and emphasis on risk assessment should be a positive development.

The local council acknowledges the further work it needs to do to improve its quality assurance process across adult and children's services, particularly in relation to assessment and care management.

Adults

Timely reviews of care plans have decreased for the third consecutive year within RCT, which is below the Wales average. The risk is that the council may be delivering unnecessary or inappropriate services as people's changing needs are not identified..

The revised operating model places Deprivation of Liberty Safeguard (DoLS) under the aegis of the adult safeguarding board. The arrangements are delivered through a joint service with Merthyr Tydfil and the health board, with RCT as the lead authority. An internal review of September 2013 identified the need for increased governance of the service and made some changes to aid the availability of best interest assessors. The joint thematic review of DoLS undertaken by CSSIW and HIW lies outside of the timeframe of this report, however the recommendations support the findings of the council's internal review. Delays remain in the processing of applications due to capacity issues and this will be an increased challenge in 2014-15, due to the recent Supreme Court judgement. Applications in 2013-14 were below that of the previous year. The joint thematic review found good quality assessment resulting in good outcomes for people, related to a constructive approach and a strong ethos of considering least restrictive solutions.

The annual report of the Cwm Taf adult safeguarding board for 2012-13 cites a relatively stable referral rate in respect of RCT. The council informs us that referrals have increased significantly in 2013-14. While the 2012-13 report provides a range of statistics, there is little narrative from which to identify reflections on practise, progress and areas of development. A consequence of the revised operating model has been that concerns that may previously have been dealt with within adult teams are now forwarded to DLMs in the safeguarding team. This has created capacity issues in safeguarding and (partly) accounts for the rise in recorded referrals. CSSIW has highlighted a concern in 2014-15 with regard to inter-agency procedures where large numbers of safeguarding referrals are received from one care setting and where there is the possibility of police action. These issues will be an area of follow up this year.

There are robust processes around the identification and review of care failures in residential care. The council has an efficient multi agency two tier system built on constructive relationships and a strong ethos of information sharing between partners.

Children

This year has seen an increase of 30% of children on the child protection register in 2013-14 to 471, the highest it has been. The trend in the council has been upward since 2001, although with significant yearly variation and including a reduction in 2012-13. While the trend of the Welsh average has also been upward, the increase is less marked. The council has begun to audit but has not yet identified an issue with thresholds or themes. The council has subsequently committed to a multi agency

safeguarding hub and we will welcome results of any further analysis that becomes available.

The council is successfully prioritising allocation of these children to qualified workers and performs well on ensuring that child protection conferences and core groups are timely. The inspection of children's services recommended greater clarification on arrangements for staff where children receiving service from the children's disability team are also subject child protection procedures. A protocol was subsequently developed and we would welcome information resulting from ongoing monitoring.

A task group led by Cwm Taf safeguarding children's board has been established to ensure a multi-agency response to young people at risk of being sexually exploited, going missing and harmful sexual behaviour based on robust risk assessment (risky behaviours protocol). Further work profiling this group to anticipate services required has subsequently been completed and was recommended by the looked after children inspection. The board has also introduced an assessment tool for neglect that considers motivation, capacity and other supports.

Two thirds of care leavers (68.4%) are in education, employment or training at age nineteen and are very likely still to be in contact with the local council. The council continues to perform well in relation to pathway planning and personal advisors. The care leavers we spoke with during the looked after children inspection, were very positive as to the support they received as care leavers, both from social services and the third sector agency. This was not the case when asked about their experience of care and social work support during this period.

Most significantly, perhaps, has been the marked improvement in 2013-14 in 16 year olds in the care system attaining qualifications. Although still under the national average, significant improvements in outcomes have been achieved for this age group. Improvements in secondary school attendance for looked after children in RCT are also noted and is slightly above the Wales average.

The council has met its targets in placing children for adoption and exceeded targets in children becoming subject to special guardianship.

Areas of progress

The council has:

- developed the MASH model;
- developed a risky behaviours protocol and neglect tool;
- improved educational attainment of looked after children; and
- placed more children for adoption or special guardianship.

Areas for improvement

The council should:

- improve systems for the quality assurance of assessment and care management;
- ensure adult care plans are reviewed within statutory timescales; and
- review interagency procedures in adult safeguarding.

Capacity

Delivering Social Services

A clear challenge exists in the face of the increase in the older population generally and the 14% increase in referrals to the council's children's services in 2013-14. The last ten years has evidenced a 65% rise in open cases to children's services in the council (compared with a 42% rise across Wales). Caseloads for qualified workers in children's services are not considered by the council to be higher than other neighbouring authorities. The council chooses to allocate children to unqualified workers, rather than leave them unallocated or to significantly increase caseloads of qualified workers. The director will review the configuration of children's services and their composition in 2014-15.

Low morale, stress and communication between tiers of staff was raised by CSSIW at the inspection of children's services published in May 2013 and also at the looked after children inspection in 2014. At the earlier inspection, staff reported feeling overwhelmed by their sense of high workloads and complex cases. Pressures were identified on a disproportionately newly qualified workforce and greater expectations were made of unqualified staff than in some other local authorities, due to allocation practise.

The council has had difficulties in retaining sufficient numbers of skilled staff in children's services who can then be promoted to leadership and managerial roles in the service. The director reports that recruitment of social workers and senior practitioners is continuing. While the single point salary arrangement has been identified as a factor in recruitment and retention difficulties, the council feels this is not the only issue. CSSIW have noted that morale is higher in staff from the IFST. A workforce group is set to report in the autumn on retention issues and steps have been taken to improve communications, particularly 'top down', throughout the management structure.

The council has identified issues with its own quality assurance systems and is considering this, particularly in relation to assessment and care planning. The service director for children's services chairs an improvement panel and the workforce development plan for the year refers to the need to develop more consistent quality assurance across social services as a priority.

The workforce development plan for 2013-14 recognised the need to involve and reflect service users and their views in training through the Carers and Service Users Involved in Training (CSUIT) group. The plan is well structured and focuses on the needs of newly qualified social workers. IFST staff also receives extensive training. This contrasts with experienced childcare social workers who told CSSIW, earlier in the year, that there were limited professional developments for them. However, we are aware of practitioner learning events within the council and sessions devised for the dissemination of learning from child practise reviews.

Areas of progress

The council has:

- recruited for additional qualified staff; and
- established an improvement panel for children's services.

Areas for improvement

The council should:

- ensure there are sufficient numbers of experienced qualified workers within teams;
- continue to review communication channels and workforce issues; and
- Make progress with plans to achieve greater involvement of service users in training.

Providing direction

This has been a period of considerable change for the leadership of the council. The year 2013-14 saw the retirement of the Chief Executive and the absence of the director from the end of 2013. However, an interim director was identified with a permanent appointment in place from September 2014. It will be of benefit that the newly appointed director is well known to the council and has been an advocate of the joint working arrangements achieved between Merthyr Tydfil and the council to date. The director of children's services also changed during the year.

The looked after children inspection found that corporate parenting arrangements are well established in the council and looked after children are identified as a clear priority. It identified that complaints and performance indicators were reported to the Corporate Parenting Board. However, it also found that members did not give sufficient challenge via the scrutiny process. WAO have been more favourable as to the scrutiny process of the council and regard the council as clear in its reporting of performance.

The council has a comprehensive and strategic approach to promoting Welsh language and bilingualism. It has engaged in public consultation with regard to changes in adult

service provision although there may be more to do, particularly in relation to the involvement of individual citizens in their care planning and reviews.

The director's report was thorough and accessible. A range of plans to review service provision and structures are presented. These are designed to increase the focus on prevention and early intervention and to align services in preparation for the Act. The council is realistic as to the degree of challenge this will present in particular areas, not least in respect of workforce capacity. Further restructuring is planned for both children and adult services. This may be of particular benefit if it releases resources for more front line workers, particularly qualified staff. The council has demonstrated mature relationships with the local health board and other local authorities that have facilitated joint working arrangements.

The overspend in adult services, offset by the underspend in children's services, resulted in an effectively balanced budget at year end. The council has shown evidence of strategic financial planning and realistic efficiency savings such that it is confident of its ability to manage 2014-15 focussing on achieving improved outcomes for people. This will involve restriction of services to some who were previously considered eligible for help, and the reshaping of service provision that will affect others. The council intends these changes to be balanced by greater community support and increased promotion of independence in line with the ethos of the impending legislation.

Areas of progress

The council has:

- strong corporate parenting;
- good partnership working; and
- sound financial planning

Areas for improvement

The council should:

- continue to advance the integration of care and support with health services and other councils;