



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

Performance Evaluation Report 2014–15

Merthyr Tydfil County Borough
Council Social Services

October 2015

This report sets out the key areas of progress and areas for improvement in Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council Social Services for the year 2014–15

Annual Review and Evaluation of Performance 2014 - 2015

Local Authority: Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council

This report sets out CSSIW's evaluation of Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council's performance in delivering its social services functions.

1. Summary

- 1.1. There has been a change of director this year in social services, along with other senior staff. There are considerable financial pressures on the authority, although the director does not feel this has had a significant impact on services for people as yet.
- 1.2. People are beginning to experience the benefits of prevention and early intervention services. This has contributed to reduced delays for people leaving hospital and resulted in fewer older people requiring residential care and/ or long term support in the community. The director is clear that further progress can be made in safely reducing longer term interventions by providing reablement services. She is aware it will be important to fully engage the community in this process of change that is required by the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act (SSWBW Act) and the current financial pressure on the local authority. The council is increasingly commissioning services rather than providing them itself. There is more progress that can be made to ensure innovative and proactive commissioning of services that meet the needs of people and follows the drive toward increased independence where this is possible.
- 1.3. The council is involved in several strands of joint working with Rhondda Cynon Taf and Cwm Taf University Health Board (CTUHB). An example of innovation is the establishment of the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). The council should continue to seek efficiencies and good practice by taking opportunities to work jointly with other councils. There is a clear imperative to integrate services with health and there is room to improve upon the pace of change here.
- 1.4. Performance in aspects of children's services has reduced this year. Fewer children have become looked after as a result of a coherent strategy and the numbers of children placed on the child protection register has also reduced. The council is undertaking further analysis of the reasons behind this reduction to fully satisfy itself that decision making is robust. While there has been a very slight reduction in

children deemed to be 'in need', it is not yet apparent that early intervention services are having a significant impact in reducing the flow of children requiring traditional forms of social services support.

2. Response to last year's areas for improvement

Identified improvement last year	Progress in 2014-15
Continue to drive forward the integration agenda.	Some progress in joint working arrangements in specific practice areas. Further progress could be made with regard to the pace of change.
Maintain the focus on raising awareness around safeguarding and corporate parenting.	Establishment of MASH, improved activity by Cwm Taf Adult Safeguarding Board, corporate safeguarding policy, training for elected members and council staff outside of social services.
Continue its focus on delivering outcomes in both children and adult services.	Some progress is evident. Reduction of numbers of looked after children and children on child protection register. Reduction of older people in residential care and reablement promoting independence.
Provide the necessary support and leadership to the management team until the new leadership team is fully embedded.	New director appointed and changes during the year at senior management level. New senior management structure introduced. Support arrangements in place.
Closely monitor the impact of decisions made around withdrawal of adult services in response to reducing budgets.	Council state there has been no significant impact on people in 2014-15.
Improve its transitional arrangements to ensure young people entering adulthood have their needs appropriately met.	Review of care leavers and 16+ planned for 2015-16. Identified support required for young adult carers. There has been some progress in mapping needs of young people with disabilities transitioning into adulthood.
Understand the reasons behind the poor uptake of support to carers.	Some progress but continues to be priority.
Monitor levels of DToC closely over the coming year.	Improvement made. Further improvement required to reach Welsh average.
Strengthen commissioning and contract monitoring approach in both children and adult services.	Some progress made. New Joint Adult Commissioning Strategy in consultation phase. Work by Children's

	Commissioning Consortium Cymru (4C's) to complete in 2015-16.
Implement the recruitment and marketing strategy specifically in relation to foster carers who have the skills to effectively safeguard children and young people with complex needs and the most risky behaviours.	Progress has been made. Additional foster carers recruited and additional training provided.
Improve performance in relation to reviews undertaken in adult services.	Improvement made. Further improvement required to reach Welsh average.
Work with health colleagues to improve access to CAMHS services so that therapeutic needs are met in a timely way.	Wait times for access to CAMHS remains a matter for concern. This is recognised by CTUHB and Welsh Government.
Give further attention to developing specialist dementia services.	No specific action, the council continues to consider.
Continue to develop the outcomes framework in measuring outcomes for families.	Staff have received training and outcomes based work is being embedded in the work of children's services.

3. Visits and inspections undertaken during the year

- 3.1. Site visits provide CSSIW with an opportunity to speak with people who receive services, their families and staff who manage and work in the services. During 2014-15, site visits were made to review:
- Services and support for carers.
 - Adult safeguarding arrangements.
- 3.2. CSSIW also met with senior officers of the council throughout the year to review social services performance and discuss progress with the areas for improvement identified in last year's performance evaluation. The council was helpful in its engagement with CSSIW and readily facilitated access to enable site visits to take place.
- 3.3. During the year, CSSIW undertook inspections of regulated services run by the council and by independent operators. This included reviews of the in house fostering service and adult care homes. Details of these are contained in published reports and available on CSSIW's website.
- 3.4. CSSIW participated in the Wales Audit Office (WAO) review: Independence of Older people which will report during 2015-16.

4. Areas for follow up by CSSIW next year

4.1. A number of specific areas for improvement have been identified in the body of this report. The council's progress in relation to these will be discussed with the council during regular engagement meetings in the coming year. Specific areas for follow up will include:

- Joint day service for people with dementia.
- Prevention and early intervention services for adults.
- Support for children and families from the enhanced child in need service.
- The operation of the risk taking behaviour protocol (Cwm Taf safeguarding children board).
- Discussion about the analysis of child protection registration.

5. Inspection and review plan for 2015 -16

5.1. CSSIW is also undertaking the following thematic inspections and services in Merthyr Tydfil which may be selected for fieldwork:

- National review of domiciliary care
- National review of services for people with learning disabilities
- National review of care planning for looked after children

6. The extent to which the experiences and outcomes for people who need care and support are improving their wellbeing.

Adults

Overview

6.1. The council's priorities for adult services are to promote reablement and early intervention services for people to reduce the need for long term care and support. The council recognises that it needs to engage with people around the changes it wishes to make to social care to alter expectations of traditional services and to prepare for the implementation of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act (SSWBW Act).

6.2. The council has sought to reduce the number of older people (over 65

years) in residential care and has achieved a reduction in the rate, from 22 people per 1000 of the population to 20 people per 1000. This has halted an upward trend since 2011. However, there remains a higher rate of older people in residential care in Merthyr Tydfil than in the majority of other Welsh authorities. Senior management continue to consider how this population can be further reduced safely.

- 6.3. The council operates two care homes that provide support for people with personal care needs, some of whom have dementia. Placements for people with dementia are increasingly needed in Merthyr Tydfil, as elsewhere. Both of the homes have been inspected by CSSIW this year and one was issued with non-compliance notices as a result of breach of regulations. The local authority responded to the matters and practice has improved. The council should continue to ensure it has robust quality assurance systems in place and we are informed a rota of visits from senior management and a cabinet member has been established this year. The council commissioned an independent review of these homes during the year and it will continue to consider the value for money represented by the homes and provision for the increasingly complex needs of the future residential population.
- 6.4. Care homes in Merthyr Tydfil from the independent sector have largely provided good quality care during the year. Information sharing between safeguarding and contracts and commissioning has appeared good operationally, although we note that the planned provider performance protocol was not established this year as planned. With additional resource, it is planned for 2015-16. Where concerns about a particular setting or service have been identified, we have noted statutory partners share information and agree a course of action.
- 6.5. We advise the council to continue to monitor capacity in adult safeguarding and contracts monitoring in residential care. Due to the size of the authority, smaller teams means there is little resilience and contingency plans need to be in place. In particular, resources to monitor residential settings where the council commissions placements have not been robust in 2014-15, although this has been supplemented in 2015-16 and additional management scrutiny built into the process.
- 6.6. The council has been successful in 2014-15 in reducing the rate of people delayed in leaving hospital (DToC) due to social care reasons from 6 people per 1000 to 5 people per 1000. This is comparable with the Welsh average. The director attributes the success to the work of the initial response and reablement teams. These services are discussed further below. Delays are understood to be due to winter pressures and the lack of immediate availability of nursing beds within care homes on specific occasions. There is an increasing need for

nursing beds within the authority or local to it and the commissioning strategy reflects this.

- 6.7. Overall, the council reduced the rate of older people it supported in the community from 109 people per 1000 to 86 people. This is against a rising population and a Welsh average of 67 people per 1000, which means that Merthyr Tydfil is ranked 5th highest in Wales for level of community support to older people. The council's strategy is to reduce the number of people it supports by improving the range and effectiveness of prevention and early intervention services. This will decrease the need for longer term intervention and the reduction discussed here may suggest that these services are having an impact.
- 6.8. During the year the council has taken steps to transfer operations of its two domiciliary care services to external providers and by the beginning of 2015-16, Merthyr Tydfil is commissioning all of its homecare support. A survey of service user opinion was undertaken by the council which found that two thirds of respondents supported the transfer to an independent provider. We inspected one of the local authority services in 2014-15, which was satisfactory and the other was due to de register.
- 6.9. The council undertook more timely reviews of adult care plans this year and thereby halted a decline in performance over the last four years. In 2014-15, 79% of care plans were reviewed which is similar to the Welsh average. Improving further to reach 90% that was achieved in 2009-10 would be a positive goal and is in the context of fewer people to review. Staffing difficulties within teams has been cited as a reason that further progress was not made. Reviews ensure people's needs for care and support are being met and resources are allocated appropriately according to need. It is also an opportunity for care managers to identify concerns arising from residential or domiciliary care of vulnerable adults.
- 6.10. Deprivation of liberty safeguards were subject to national inspection by CSSIW and HIW at the beginning of 2014. We did not conduct fieldwork in Merthyr Tydfil, but arrangements are shared with the CTUHB and Rhondda Cynon Taf, which was subject to fieldwork visits. Some delays in identifying best interest assessors (BIAs) were identified which councils and health board were seeking to improve. Recommendations around increased structure and governance were made and it was acknowledged that partners had noted these issues prior to the inspection. Along with other local authorities in Wales, 2014-15 has seen a marked increase in applications for deprivation of liberty safeguard authorisations as a result of the Cheshire West judgement. Applications in Merthyr Tydfil increased from 7 in 2013-14 to 212 in 2014-15. The authority increased its capacity of BIAs at the end of the year with a view to increasing capacity further in 2015-16 and ensuring

resources are used equitably across the authorities. Twenty three of the applications in 2014-15 were subject to assessment, which resulted in an extensive waiting list at the beginning of 2015-16. The local authorities are using a prioritisation tool to ensure assessments are completed where the need is the greatest and we are informed assessments are proceeding at a greater rate. However, capacity is likely to remain an issue this year due to the large numbers of applications received.

- 6.11. There was no significant change in the proportion of adults under 65 years of age that the council supports in the community and this remains around the Welsh average. CSSIW is undertaking a national review of services for adults with learning disabilities in 2015-16 and we will learn more about the experience of adults receiving support when this inspection is undertaken. The council wish to increase the number of adults receiving support from the Shared Lives scheme operated by South East Wales Adult Placement Scheme. As of January 2015, only one person was in a long term placement, six people had received respite support and others sessional support. The demand for this service cannot be met and the scheme is prioritising recruitment of more people to offer placements in Merthyr Tydfil and increasing awareness among professionals. The council also maintains three registered homes for younger adults, one of which is a respite facility. During 2014-15, the council was engaged in a process to identify an external provider to convert and manage the other two registered homes as supported accommodation facilities. Our inspections of these homes in 2014-15 found that they provided a good level of care and support.
- 6.12. We undertook site work in March 2015 looking at the council's support for carers. We noted the comprehensive report by the People and Work Unit that can be used to inform service development. Funding for carers was reduced in 2014-15, with a further reduction in 2015-16. The authority part funds one carer information and development officer post, managed within the voluntary sector. The council does not directly employ specialist workers, relying on care managers to complete carers' assessments and champions within teams to raise awareness and disseminate information.
- 6.13. Performance indicators for 2014-15 show there was an increase of 47 carers identified in the authority and an increase from 36% to 40% of carers who received an assessment of their needs within the year. This is slightly above the Welsh average (37%). Sixty nine percent of those assessed receive a service as a result, not including respite. There is a clear value to the majority of carers undergoing an assessment of their needs. The director's report outlines the goal of identifying more carers and providing more assessments. Better recording should produce

more accurate data this year; this has been a longstanding issue in Merthyr Tydfil and other authorities. We have recommended the council reviews reasons carers refuse assessments to see if further encouragement can be provided. We have also recommended that all social services staff are aware of the rights and needs of carers. We spoke to a small number of carers this year who indicated they were satisfied with the support they received.

- 6.14. The council has adopted a strong model of joint working by developing the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) with Rhondda Cynon Taf, Police and CTUHB. The MASH completes the early stages of the safeguarding arrangements for both adults and children and became operational for adult referrals in January 2015. It is hoped that having key partners together on one site will increase information sharing and efficiencies. However social work staff from the two councils operate separately within the MASH and it will be important that greater integration is achieved over time if the full impact of this initiative is to be realised.
- 6.15. The council continues to perform well in managing risk when it receives adult protection referrals. The number of referrals received in 2014-15 has fallen to 68 which is comparable to 2011-2013 but is less than the significant increase in concerns referred in 2013-14. This was partly due to a high number of concerns from a particular residential setting that year. CSSIW completed site work on adult protection arrangements in February 2015. Overall, we found the system and process for the protection of adults at risk in Merthyr Tydfil is robust with strong monitoring and quality assurance mechanisms. Efforts had been made to raise the profile of adult protection across the council and there continues to be further work required in this area. The council has responded swiftly to our feedback by devising an action plan and has brought this before its scrutiny committee. The council has benefitted from strong leadership from the safeguarding manager where this post manages both adult and children's safeguarding.
- 6.16. The council has identified a more timely response to complaints as a goal for next year and we note that only half (51%) of complaints were responded to within initial timescales. Most (86%) were resolved at stage one of the process, although improvements in response times may result in a reduction in the rate of escalated concerns.

Key National Priorities (adults)

Preventative and early intervention services

- 6.17. The plan arising from the strategy for older people's services across

Cwm Taf is currently subject to public consultation. Needs were mapped during 2014-15 and the council, in conjunction with Rhondda Cynon Taf, CTUHB and the third sector are proposing a three tiered model with a greater emphasis on the role of local universal services to support people and improve wellbeing. In conjunction, reablement services are providing early intervention with a view to reducing the need for specialist services. This is intended to reduce spend and to align services and approach to SSWBW Act.

- 6.18. The council is aware of the need to improve the availability and access to information, advice and assistance and consider further means of changing the expectations of many in the population around the provision of direct services. The challenge for the authority will be the support it can provide to community groups and those in the third sector to establish sufficient universal resources in the face of economic austerity. Merthyr Tydfil has the 2nd highest levels of deprivation in Wales, as measured by the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD).
- 6.19. Almost two thirds (64%) of the 393 people leaving hospital and supported by the reablement service in 2014-15 achieved independence from services following intervention or were transferred to a care provider on a reduced package of support. This compares with an average figure of 71% across Wales, cited in the report of the social services improvement agency (SSIA) released in December 2014. The council will wish to continue to improve on the reablement of people where possible although we recognise that performance indicators are not yet established. It seems likely that early intervention and reablement work has been effective, in that the council has supported less older people in residential care and in the community.
- 6.20. The authority was facing a significant reduction in Intermediate Care Fund(s) (ICF) going into 2015-16 which was causing considerable anxiety among the third sector providers toward the end of the year. All services are being reviewed in the current year and a community care co-ordinator has been appointed. Adult day services in Merthyr Tydfil have not been substantially impacted by budget issues and the services have been returned to the portfolio of the head of adult services at the end of 2014-15 and is currently under review.
- 6.21. Merthyr Tydfil is a partner on the 'Together for Mental Health' Partnership Board formed by CTUHB. The partnership has supported a range of wellbeing work outlined in its latest annual report. This includes supporting Communities First and other agencies to deliver input combating loneliness, debt advice, alternatives to the use of anti depressants etc. The board has identified a range of priorities, including

increased citizen engagement to better ensure community involvement to achieve high level and local outcomes. The council wishes to further increase the uptake of direct payments in 2015-16 following the increase this year. The director has identified new initiatives that will begin in 2015-16 for people with mental health issues. The council is in discussions with the health board and Rhondda Cynon Taf aimed at resolving funding issues for placements for people who are eligible for aftercare as a result of section 117 of the Mental health Act. Responsibilities under this section have risen and senior management is understandably wishing to resolve fairly and to its satisfaction.

Integration of health and social care services for older people with complex needs

- 6.22. The council is partners with Rhondda Cynon Taf and CTUHB in the production of a joint statement of intent with regard to older people with complex needs (March 2014). The emphasis is on prevention and early intervention, as one would expect. Current workstreams are outlined that include the frail elderly and rehabilitation model and a plan to further develop the '@home' initiative, designed to allow timely discharge by the provision of a reablement service. We understand this will involve a greater role for health in the community and a need to improve consistency and joined up working between social services and health operationally.
- 6.23. A joint dementia day service is being developed with the health board by bringing together the separate services based at the Health Park. This will include a resolution of funding disparities and a pooling of resources. CSSIW will visit this service during 2015-16. Strategically, further progress could also be made by improving the pace of change and it is important that this is being actively addressed at the highest levels within the agencies. Further opportunities should be identified to increase joint working in order to simplify access for people and achieve specific objectives such as reducing unscheduled care etc.

Areas of progress

- Reduction in number of older people in residential care.
- Reduction in delayed transfers of care (DToC).
- Establishment of Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)

Areas for improvement

- To ensure timely reviews of care plans.
- Increase placements with Shared Lives scheme.
- Continued progress toward integrated services for people with dementia and mental health needs.
- Ensure adequate capacity for DoLS assessments.

Children and young people

Overview

- 6.24. The council's performance has dropped in relation to timely completion of initial and core assessments this year. In 2013-14, the council completed 78% of initial assessments within the required seven days whereas in 2014-15 this reduced to 57% and where there was a significant reduction in referrals and the numbers of assessments completed. Where assessments were not completed in time, the delay in completion in Merthyr Tydfil was somewhat longer than most other Welsh councils. The council attributes this to staffing difficulties in the assessment team and a drop in performance around the implementation of the MASH. We are informed that monitoring processes have been established in 2015-16 to improve performance.
- 6.25. There has been a significant increase in the number of core assessments that the council has completed this year, which may be relevant to the decrease in timeliness from 87% produced within timescales in 2013-14 to 81% in 2014-15. However, this year's performance is in line with the Welsh average.
- 6.26. The council performs well in the allocation of qualified social workers to children in need, children on the child protection register and those looked after. There has been a small decrease in the likelihood of an initial assessment being undertaken by a social worker. We are informed this was due to support workers undertaking assessments prior to receiving their social work qualification; the individuals became qualified at the end of 2014/15. The authority has moved staff to ensure more qualified social workers are allocated to children where more complex work is required. We recognise that support workers may be very experienced. The council will continue to wish to satisfy itself that staff in children's services have the necessary skills and experience to undertake the work they are completing.

- 6.27. The authority has deemed slightly less children as children in need this year, in line with the Welsh average reduction of 4%. The authority has invested in an enhanced children in need service that aims to support families and reduce the need for children to become looked after. We are aware of the decrease in the numbers of looked after children outlined below. This service received an 87% satisfaction rating from service users in a council survey. Childcare staff have received training in an outcomes based approach and the council is positive about embedding this approach into many of its teams in children's services, as it promotes the greater participation of families in their interventions. We will visit the enhanced children in need service in 2015-16
- 6.28. The council continues to have the second highest rate of children on the child protection register in Wales. However, the council has achieved a significant reduction this year from 134 children to 105 that equates to a reduction of 22%. This has halted a four year upward trend in registrations in Merthyr Tydfil. There has been an effort to engage with families at an early stage, through preventative and early intervention services. While this appears positive if it reflects a reduction in risks to the children of Merthyr Tydfil, the director is understandably concerned to ensure the safety of this significant reduction. The quality assurance and standards subgroup of Cwm Taf safeguarding children's board (CTSCB) undertook a review of cases where children were deregistered within six months. In some instances the group could not be assured relevant decisions had been informed by core assessments. There was an increase in re registrations in 2014-15. The council is clearly committed to analysing these findings and extracting learning needs for staff and management. We ask to be appraised of the conclusions from this work.
- 6.29. The Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) has been operational for referrals of child safeguarding since April 2015 and is therefore outside of the scope of this report. However, this represents a drive by the authority to improve upon its existing safeguarding processes. The MASH is intended as a significant step to improving timely multi agency information sharing and decision making and we look forward to the first evaluation of this development when this becomes available. The council maintains excellent performance in relation to timely initial conferences, core groups and reviews.
- 6.30. CTSCB has finalised its risk taking behaviour protocol for young people and this will be implemented in 2015-16. This puts robust systems in place for ongoing risk management of young people, clear decision making and escalation processes. We would be interested to gain further insight into the practice of this protocol in 2015-16 and are aware that CTSCB is planning to identify cohorts of young people deemed

most at risk. One Child Practice Review took place during the year and some actions were identified around safeguarding procedures and child in need plans.

- 6.31. The Wales Audit Office reviewed the council's management and governance arrangements for safeguarding children in 2014. The review looked across the range of council services and advised that more staff from service areas outside of social services receive training in addition to elected members. The council was advised to develop a corporate safeguarding policy and appoint designated safeguarding officers in all council service areas and ensure appropriate internal audit for safeguarding. These recommendations are reflected in an action plan and we are aware that steps have been taken to address matters raised.
- 6.32. The council doubled the numbers of young carers to which it provided support and assessment of needs in 2014-15 from the previous year, from 36% to 62%. Previously, there were issues with data gathering and the director believes this increase is due to better recording practice in addition to an improved service. However, the local authority remains significantly below the Welsh average of provision of support to 91% of young carers. Barnardo's is commissioned to provide assessment and support for young carers and this service has recently been positioned within prevention and early intervention services. There continues to be funding pressures and the council recognises it does not meet the level of need to support young carers across the authority. To address these issues, In 2015-16 it has implemented a tiered model of support. It is intended that young carers are identified at an earlier stage and their needs assessed alongside those of the family. More intensive specialist support for individual young carers will be provided where this is necessary.
- 6.33. There has also been a gap in dedicated provision for young adult carers who are leaving school and entering further education or the job market. This is a significant period in the life of young people where planning and making choices can be especially difficult for those with caring responsibilities. The council will wish to be confident that it is releasing appropriate funding and is content with its current commissioning arrangements, such that it is providing the right level of support to these vulnerable children and young people.
- 6.34. The Vale, Valleys and Cardiff adoption collaborative was in development during the year and is one of the five regional adoption services making up the national adoption service. Progress of the regional service will be carefully reviewed to ensure performance of the collaboration matches and improves on that achieved by the council alone. The Cwm

Taf youth offending service (YOS) became fully operational in October 2014. The joint service with Rhondda Cynon Taf works across two sites with Rhondda Cynon Taf providing the line management. We understand the merger did not release any savings for the authorities. Along with other youth offending services, there has been a significant reduction in young people sent to custody from Merthyr Tydfil in the last few years or entering the youth justice system for the first time. Re offending among young people from Merthyr Tydfil remains relatively high, although this is due to a very small number of young people.

Key national priorities

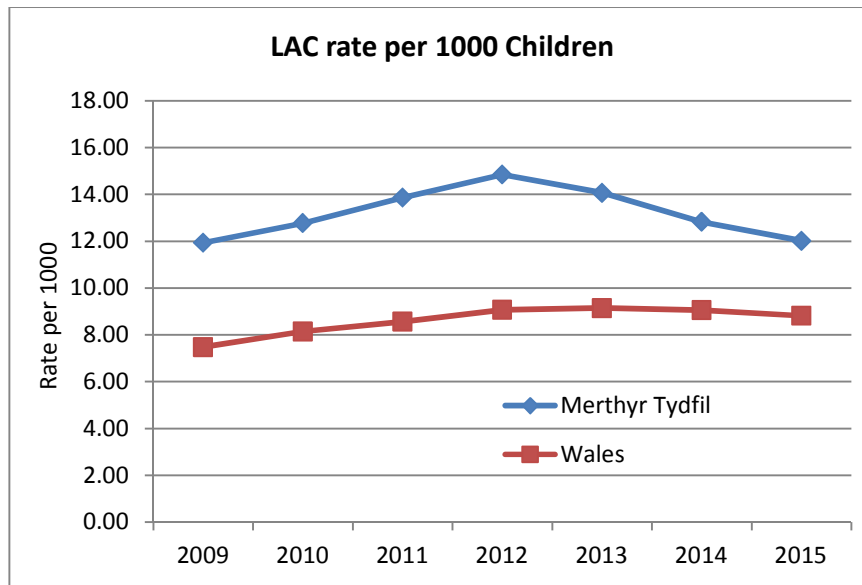
Preventative and early intervention services

- 6.35. A range of prevention and early interventions services and support is available within the authority. This includes a joint Integrated Family Support Team (IFST) with Rhondda Cynon Taf. There have been efforts to review the remit and effectiveness of the service during the year and better demonstrate the outcomes of intervention. Referrals to the service dropped from 30 families in 2013-14 to 24 in 2014-15. We understand that the council has some confidence that internal changes will improve service in 2015-16.
- 6.36. The council also operates the Multi Intervention Assistance (MIA) from its Families First Programme and other parenting, domestic violence groups etc. The authority wishes families to receive a quick and proportionate response to their requests for assistance and recognises that this may best be provided by preventative services provided from the third sector. Review work has been undertaken to improve access to the MIA by families with a child with a disability. Referrals to family group conferencing and mediation can be made as part of the enhanced children in need service or the public law outline (PLO). The numbers using these commissioned services are relatively small, although clearly if such intervention prevents the need for admissions into care, then it is of significant benefit to families and will result in savings for the authority. The slight decrease in children in need is positive; however the council will seek a further decrease through the impact of prevention and early intervention.
- 6.37. The authority is aware of its responsibility to provide information, advice and assistance under the provisions of the SSWBW Act. We are not aware of tangible advances in this area but the council is anticipating this will be provided by universal services and/or the third sector, thereby allowing social services to engage with families and individuals

with more complex issues. This will require a strong plan for public engagement.

- 6.38. Flying Start is now within the people and performance directorate that includes social services and education. Although line managed by education, it is intended that this will allow more of a focus on these services as a vital aspect of prevention and early intervention. We have inspected a range of day care provision across Merthyr Tydfil that are funded or partly funded by Flying Start. We have consistently found the Flying Start advisors to be proactive and concerned to maintain high standards within settings. We have raised some issues this year following inspections of settings that are partly funded by Flying Start. While advisors promptly sought to address the issues, they had been less involved in these services due to the part funding arrangement.
- 6.39. Merthyr Tydfil's childcare sufficiency assessment (2014-2017) demonstrates the council's lead role in '*facilitating the childcare market to ensure it meets the needs of working parents*'. The assessment found there are lone parents and people looking to return to work who view the perceived lack of affordable childcare as a barrier. National Minimum Standards allow registered child minders to look after a maximum of six children under eight years old. However, the planning department in Merthyr Tydfil requires child minders wishing to care for more than three children to apply for planning permission. We would request the council does not place its own 'blanket' restriction on registered child minders and consider the advice in the circular '*Planning and childcare in Wales*' (August 2006). This limitation is likely to deter people considering child minding and thereby impact the childcare market. In addition, the forthcoming extension of childcare registration for people caring for children up to 12 years old will require review within the authority and we would advise serious consideration is given to the imposition of any further restrictions.

Looked after children



Numbers of LAC as at 31 March 2015

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Merthyr Tydfil	152	161	174	185	176	160	150

6.40. The above chart illustrates the seven year trend in the numbers of looked after children (LAC) per 1000 population across Wales and in Merthyr Tydfil. This shows a downward trend in the numbers of looked after children over the last four years. Merthyr Tydfil continues to look after more children, per capita, than most other authorities in Wales (it is the 5th highest). It has looked after 10 less children this year which is in line with its robust strategy to reduce numbers by 30 children over the next three years (2015-2018). This will release a saving of at least £500,000 which will be welcomed as the budget for looked after children is the most significant financial pressure within children's services.

6.41. The council aims to prevent 'drift' of young people in the care system by ensuring a timely return home, where possible, or by permanency planning. The strategy outlines high expectations of its social workers and managers with regard to planning and maintaining an outcome focussed approach and a system of weekly and monthly panels to ensure continuous monitoring and review. The authority performs well in ensuring that eligible children have a plan for permanence.

- 6.42. All but a few children being looked after by the authority reside within the authority area, and the majority are in foster care (in house or independent agency). Performance indicators have shown a decrease in placement stability for a small group of young people, where 7% have experienced three or more moves in the year, compared to 3% in 2013-14. During the year, the authority has strengthened the review of looked after young people by introducing meetings and panels with functions including the reduction of avoidable moves.
- 6.43. The authority's fostering service received a positive CSSIW inspection report this year. We are informed by the director that one or more foster carers have left independent agencies to become local authority carers, due to the strong support provided. As part of the looked after children strategy (March 2015), the council continues to recruit foster carers to increase in house capacity and provide training to upskill them to look after young people with disabilities and complex needs. Thirty four extra carers were recruited in 2014-15 and 40 carers have received training up to June 2015. The council intends to make less use of independent fostering agencies and reduce placement breakdowns. The approval of senior management within social services is now required for each placement with independent fostering agencies to provide further scrutiny. The council does not operate its own children's homes and continues to use a consortium arrangement to commission placements for children in the care system.
- 6.44. There has been a significant drop in statutory visits to children in their placements from 93% last year to 79% in 2014-15 and this performance is below the Welsh average of 88%. The director assures us this reduction in performance is being investigated. The council performs well in ensuring regular review meetings for children. However social workers will be better informed of children's needs and wishes where there is a good level of contact. There has been an increase in looked after children moving schools within the year, which has taken Merthyr Tydfil above the Wales average. However the variation is due to a very small number of children (four more than last year). The council has achieved excellent performance in ensuring that looked after children have a Personal Education Plan (PEP) in place and attendance figures for primary and secondary looked after children are good. However the council continues to be concerned at the relatively poorer performance of looked after children at key stage 4 and has a range of initiatives aimed to address this.
- 6.45. The council provides good support for those young people leaving the care system. All young people leaving care in 2014-15 are in suitable accommodation and 13 out of 15 are in touch with social workers or personal advisors. The council commissions Barnardo's to provide

personal advisors to support young people. Indications are of excellent performance in ensuring young people leaving care have clear plans for the immediate future (pathway planning) and have a designated personal advisor, in addition to social workers/support workers. Not all of the young people are in employment or education, although the numbers are so small that children's services are fully aware of the reasons behind this. The council has implemented the 'when I'm ready' scheme that it previously piloted. The council is intending to review its services to care leavers and other young people 16 and over in 2015-16.

- 6.46. A group for looked after children and care leavers to participate in children's policy has been formed and feeds into the corporate parenting board and have been asked to make comment on specific aspects of operations.

Areas of progress

- Reduction in looked after children.
- Establishment of the MASH.
- Implementation of risk taking protocol.
- Support for young carers.
- Recruitment and training of additional foster carers.

Areas for improvement

- Timely completion of initial assessments.
- Frequency of statutory visits to looked after children.
- Support for young adult carers.
- Change in planning policy for child minders

7. The extent to which leadership, governance and direction for the council is promoting improvement in outcomes and wellbeing for people who need care and support.

- 7.1. 2014-15 has been significant for the loss of longstanding social services officers at the most senior levels and the implementation of a new corporate management structure. From the middle of 2014 until April

2015 there were four statutory directors of social services (including interim posts) and related changes at head of service level. This will undoubtedly have impacted on the progress of change despite the ability and commitment of those involved.

- 7.2. The chief executive has established a revised structure, creating two corporate director posts and four chief officers to replace director roles. This structure does not accord with the guidance on statutory directors of social services. We have met with the chief executive who has assured us of his regular direct contact with the chief officer - statutory director for social services and his confidence in the robustness of governance structures. We are also aware of formal support arrangements in place for the newly appointed director. It is too early to evaluate the impact of the new structure; however the Wales Audit Office regards it as potentially strengthening the council's capacity to respond to the financial challenges ahead.
- 7.3. Financially, social services underspent by circa £114,000 in 2014-15. Overall, however, the council drew on its reserves to balance its budget by year end and there is a significant challenge facing the authority over the next three years where substantial savings targets are set. The Wales Audit Office's annual improvement report (June 2015) advises the council to continue with the current support for financial management provided by Welsh Government. The aim of this is to aid ongoing self-challenge on spend to realise positive outcomes and improvement. In 2013-14, Merthyr Tydfil social services spent the 3rd highest per capita in Wales and are looking to reduce this safely over time. The costs of residential care and domiciliary care for adults and supporting placements for looked after children are high and there is an increased emphasis on panel systems to approve and review spends.
- 7.4. There has been progress in developing an overall strategy for social services to improve wellbeing with clear strategic objectives and measurable outcomes; for example the strategy to reduce the numbers of looked after children. The director describes the new structure as providing greater opportunity to work toward common goals across social services and education and a greater emphasis on performance management.
- 7.5. The Cwm Taf social services and wellbeing partnership board, in conjunction with an executive group, has been formed to ensure the effective implementation of the requirements of the SSWBW Act, informed by a self assessment exercise. This established 17 workstreams in which representatives of the council will participate or lead to ensure transformation in each specific area. Meetings are established to raise staff awareness and keep them informed. The

director can clearly articulate her area of responsibility to improve wellbeing and break this down into strategic aims and objectives. The director and her senior staff are focussed on the challenge of the new legislation and she regards changing the citizens' of Merthyr Tydfil expectations of social services to be the greatest challenge.

- 7.6. The authority has agreed a joint workforce training unit with Rhondda Cynon Taf during the year and is working toward this becoming operational in 2015-16. The council commissions all of its training from external providers, but may need to find a common model of delivery with its local authority partner, which operates a different delivery model.
- 7.7. The council is engaging an independent provider to develop two supported accommodation facilities using existing care home buildings. The authority is seeking to join with Rhondda Cynon Taf to jointly commission domiciliary care. A joint commissioning strategy with Rhondda Cynon Taf was being developed during 2014-15 and this should place Merthyr Tydfil in a stronger position to commission with innovation. We are informed that the commissioning practice is becoming increasingly outcome focussed with regard to people using services.
- 7.8. The director identifies limited progress this year in furthering the work arising from 'More than Just Words', the framework for Welsh language services. This was due to the pressures in preparing for the SSWBW Act.
- 7.9. The commissioned 2014-15 review and evaluation report of scrutiny reflects on the criticisms of scrutiny rigour across the authority's committees for over 10 years. The report reflected positive change with training for members identified, regular presence of cabinet members and a 'sound' work programme agreed. The chair is strong and regarded as developing into the role. While attendance is not a general issue, given the size of committees, a failure to reach quorum on one occasion in the year was due to the absence of a relatively small number of people. Our observation of scrutiny reflected the report's findings that there was evidence of pre meetings with good quality questions prepared. We also observed the strength of follow up questions was variable and this is in accord with the review report's evaluation. Chairs of scrutiny have identified an increased focus on the council's performance and outcomes and ongoing training of members as improvement goals.

Areas of progress

- Permanent director established in post.

- Scrutiny process improved.

Areas for improvement

- Continued progress with innovative commissioning and monitoring in adult services.