Arolygiaeth Gofal
Cymru
Care Inspectorate
Wales

Performance Evaluation Inspection Report

Carmarthenshire County Council Children's Services

December 2024

1. Introduction

1.1 Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) undertook an inspection of children's services in Carmarthenshire in October 2024.

1.2 The purpose of this inspection was to review the local authority's performance in exercising its social services duties and functions in line with legislation, on behalf of Welsh Ministers. We consider the quality standards in the *Code of Practice in relation to the performance and improvement of social services in Wales* and key lines of enquiry. We seek to answer the following questions aligned to the principles of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 (The Act):

1.3 People – voice and control
- How well is the local authority ensuring all people are equal partners who have voice, choice and control over their lives and can achieve what matters to them?

- Effective leadership is evident at all levels with a highly skilled, well qualified and supported workforce working towards a shared vision?

1.4 Prevention
- How well is the local authority ensuring the need for care and support is minimised, and the escalation of need is prevented whilst ensuring that the best possible outcomes for people are achieved?

- How well is the local authority promoting resilience within communities and people are supported to fulfil their potential by actively encouraging and supporting people who need care and support, including carers, to learn, develop and participate in society?

1.5 Well-being
- How well is the local authority ensuring that people are protected and safeguarded from abuse, neglect and any other types of harm?

- How well are people supported to actively manage their well-being and make their own informed decisions so that they are able to achieve their full potential and live independently for as long as possible?

1.6 Partnership
- How well is the local authority able to assure itself effective partnerships are in place to commission and deliver fully integrated, high quality, sustainable outcomes for people?

- Are people encouraged to be involved in the design and delivery of their care and support as equal partners?

2. Glossary of Terminology

A glossary of terminology is contained in Appendix 1.

3. Summary of Inspection Findings – Children's Services

3.1 Social services functions continue to be delivered in a post pandemic context of high levels of demand and increasing complexity of children's needs. This is illustrated through the number of monthly contacts received into the children's services Central Referral Team (CRT) which has risen from 759 in April 2022 to1570 in July 2024.

3.2 Partners work to a shared ethos of safeguarding children. Senior leaders in the local authority articulate a shared vision with a positive approach to working together across directorates. Managers promote a positive working together culture.

3.3 Leaders have a clear line of sight of front-line practice, and operationally pods (comprised groups of staff working collaboratively to address family situations) work effectively to ensure the safety and well-being of children using evidenced based interventions. Staff receive regular supervision, opportunities for training and there is clear communication between strategic and operational staff about changes and service development.

3.4 Mostly, collaborative working is good across the local authority. There is positive strategic partnership working with corporate support for joint aims. Operationally, partners work well together to meet the well-being needs of children as well as keeping people safe. There are examples of practitioners across agencies working meaningfully with children.

3.5 Overall, there is a positive focus on children across partnership agencies. Staff from different sectors and services work effectively together to prevent the escalation of need. There is a commitment by partners to work together in the interests of safeguarding children at risk of harm and abuse. This is evident through positive participation by partners in important multi-agency meetings and discussions, with an explicit focus on strengths and risks in families. Some improvement is required in explicitly drawing together information and recording an analysis.

3.6 Peoples' voices are heard, and their choices respected. Practitioners are focused on developing supportive and trusting relationships with people. There is evidence of many people achieving what is important to them.

3.7 The local authority is focusing on ensuring the need for care and support is minimised and escalation of need is prevented with improvements being made to ensure children and their families are getting the right help at the right time.

4. Key findings and evidence - Children's Services

We present our key findings and evidence below in line with the four principles of the Act. Improvements required in previous CIW reports may also appear in the report to emphasise their relevance and importance at this time.

People – Voice & Choice

Strengths

4.1 There is positive practice evident in the council's shared vision and understanding of what needs to be developed across the local authority, with a strong focus to secure improvements in children's services. Appropriate support and challenge through political and corporate process is evident, with a positive culture of safeguarding promoted as everyone's collective responsibility.

4.2 There is positive practice in strong leadership and cooperation in children's services which results in operational delivery making a positive difference to outcomes for children. Transformation planning is fully supported and a new group of children's services managers are working together to drive improvements.

4.3 Management support and supervision is evident, practitioners say the support is well received, with managers described as supportive and approachable. Conversations about professional development and well-being (including those with newly qualified social workers) are variably described in supervision and could be more consistently addressed. There is managerial oversight of safeguarding decision-making and consistent opportunities for practice reflection through pod meetings.

4.4 The workforce is stabilising against a context of change at managerial level and moving away from the unforeseen challenges brought on by the pandemic. There are newly qualified and inexperienced practitioners and managers across children's services structures. This can exacerbate the challenge of safeguarding children across multi-agency activity, but is being managed appropriately with staff across teams reporting there is an open and supportive culture.

4.5 Pods combine elements of the Signs of Safety model, trauma informed and strengths-based approaches to develop care and support plans. These are highly regarded by practitioners, providing a safe place for shared decision making, with

managers in attendance. Pod meetings provide opportunities for practitioners to reflect, constructively challenge each other and consider views from different professional perspectives and areas of expertise.

4.6 There is a focus on communication across children's services through events such as 'Big Meets' (all staff forum) and newsletters, this promotes staff engagement. Issues can be addressed at all levels across teams. Actions are taken when staff raise matters.

4.7 An area of positive practice is how the local authority has invested in a 'grow your own initiative.' This approach to supporting staff through social work sponsorship and trainee schemes is now paying dividends as newly qualified staff come into posts. It is positive to note that some additional posts have been recruited to include child protection conference chairs and independent reviewing officers (IROs). Additionally, the local authority is using temporary staff (agency workers) to support teams.

4.8 The workforce is dedicated and committed, working to a clear child centred ethos. Practitioners demonstrate good communication skills and tenacity and focus on developing supportive and trusting relationships with people. People said social workers demonstrate empathy and listening skills and this was corroborated by our people survey results.

4.9 Care experienced young people highlight positive practice in describing the support and relationships with their personal advisors (PAs). PAs are strong advocates for young people. They know young people well and are committed, caring and dedicated to improving their lives. They provide practical help and advice to young people, who value the support they receive. We heard examples of the positive impact the support from PAs had on young people's well-being and the progression of their goals and plans. A few young people said they would benefit from being provided with a PA at an earlier age.

4.10 Managers, practitioners and IROs know and understand the children they work with. Practitioners value and prioritise time to listen to children. IROs similarly prioritise time to talk to children. Feedback from carers, parents and children corroborate this. They said most practitioners demonstrate key interpersonal skills.

4.11 Overall, there is good engagement with people, practitioners work with families to involve them in decisions about their lives. Strength-based and outcome focused practice is evident across services and teams, with some variation in how well people's views are recorded in assessments. Children are seen as part of an assessment, at school where necessary and at home, and their views explicitly recorded about life at home. Parental views too are well represented with focused and relevant recording evident. A few records written in the child's own words are

particularly strong in representing the child's viewpoint. Capturing people's own words in records is an area that could be developed further.

4.12 There is generally good attendance by parents at child protection conferences. This means parents are provided with opportunities to be involved in discussions about progress and plans for the future.

4.13 There are examples of child centred work being undertaken. Young people we spoke with told us of the importance and value of direct work including life story work which helps them understand their histories, identities and explanation of why they were looked after.

4.14 Children and young people are entitled to an active offer of advocacy from a statutory Independent Professional Advocate (IPA) when they become looked after or become subject of child protection enquiries which lead to an initial child protection conference. The active offer of advocacy is provided to children and young people. The advocacy provider asks children receiving an advocacy service for their views and submits a quarterly performance report to monitor take up.

4.15 Social workers advocate strongly for children's rights. One young person commented:

"I was asked whether I wanted an advocate. I said no because I am able to speak for myself and my social worker is able to advocate for me very well. I trust her, she is very understanding, very open and involved."

4.16 The local authority oversees the Welsh language proficiency of its workforce to be able to deliver an active Welsh language offer. It is committed to strengthening this. Most teams have managers or practitioners who are fluent in Welsh, with the Central Referral Team having five out of eight duty workers able to speak Welsh. The Active Offer is recorded via referral and assessments.

4.17 There are consultation opportunities taken up in planning services. The Working Together group is comprised a core of committed and knowledgeable parent/carers. They undertake a valuable role in representing the voice of carers. This does not always mean changes can be delivered as people wish, but parents/carers said their views are heard.

4.18 Parents explicitly contribute to care and support they and their children receive, for example in contributing to meetings and the development of care and support protection plans.

4.19 Children with disabilities have choice in the support they receive through direct payments and community resources. There are attempts to be creative with a clear

process of review of need, and emphasis on people being independent and autonomous where this is possible.

Areas for Improvement

4.20 Some workload supervision and pod records can be instructive rather than analytical with records focusing on a descriptive summary of what has happened. **Clarity in actions and next steps must be routinely captured in records.**

Well-being

Strengths

4.21 Generally, safeguarding practice is underpinned by consideration to risks relating to children's safety, balanced with consideration of the strengths within their families. There are examples of thorough explanation of complex family situations through pod meetings and in assessments. Potential risks to siblings are generally considered as part of the safeguarding process. There is consideration of contextual safeguarding and the wider risks associated with safety of children.

4.22 Difficult and honest conversations are conducted appropriately resulting in many young people and their families working collaboratively and openly with social workers. Practice is characterised by positive management of risk with the views of children, parents and family members listened to and understood.

4.23 Most children and young people receive a timely and effective response when needs or risk are first identified. A stakeholder told us:

"*The local authority responds to safeguarding matters promptly and effectively. They take concerns seriously and act swiftly to assess and address risks. Their clear protocols and collaboration with relevant agencies ensure that safeguarding issues are managed with a high level of professionalism and care. Additionally, they maintain open communication with all parties involved, which helps ensure that the safety and well-being of individuals are prioritised throughout the process.*"

4.24 Child protection conferences and children looked after (CLA) reviews are mostly timely, although this year some meetings have been delayed when no chairperson was available. Social work reports are mostly shared with parents in a timely way prior to conferences. Parents and where appropriate, children, are given the opportunity to speak with chairpersons to share their views. Effective work by the IRO brings additional independent rigour. They complete visits to children and monitor progress between reviews so that children's plans progress without delay.

4.25 Legal and permanence planning meetings provide tracking of children's plans in the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO), these meetings generally support timely decisions, prevent drift and ensure work progresses within suitable timescales for children in most cases.

4.26 The strength-based and risk focused prompts used across children's services and partner systems helps provide a shared understanding and use of common language. This can provide clarity about family situations and a means to communicate more effectively.

4.27 Practitioners know young people well and talk about their strengths and personalities with warmth and affection. They are proud of their achievements and advocate on their behalf to ensure that they are supported. They take time to develop trusting relationships with children, which supports children to share their views and experiences. A parent commented:

'Don't know where we would be as a family without the input of children's services. They have improved my life and my children's lives for the better. I have happier children and a happier home. They work with me, for example the safety plan. We read it together, I can add to it, and then I sign it off.'

4.28 Statutory visit records are child centred and observational with What Matters conversations evident. This helps to understand children's lived experiences, worries and what is important to them. For many children, these visits and the interventions undertaken, make a positive difference. The Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children and Young People (UASC) team helps young people achieve what is important to them, with a focus on their cultural needs.

4.29 Children and their families benefit from a multidisciplinary systemic approach. Central to this are pod meetings that whilst mainly children's services led, provide protected time for managers, practitioners and psychologists to work together to reflect on care and support, with emphasis on family centred safety planning. The pods provide opportunity to share decision making regarding complex situations.

4.30 Families are regarded as central to care and support protection plans with emphasis on a strengths-based approach to managing risk and achieving good outcomes. Nearly all assessments include a record of relevant parental history, and a record of historical risks related to domestic abuse, albeit, in a few files this was not fully explored nor brought together in a clear analysis.

4.31 Childhood exploitation guidance is used, and there is robust practice to keep children safe. Some partner organisations considered this could be improved with the implementation of strategically aligned meetings used for information sharing and planning to address both victims and perpetrators. In some other local authorities, these are commonly called Multi-Agency Child Sexual Exploitation (MACSE)

meetings. There is already multi-agency agreement for a Child Exploitation Strategy Carmarthenshire Implementation Plan' to be taken forward.

Areas for Improvement

4.32 In a few file records, the rationale to decision making was not explicit enough, with delay evident in the development of clarity in care and support protection plans. **There must be improved consistency in records to ensure there is clarity about risk, safety and what needs to happen to be assured about safety. The local authority must ensure consistency in assessments is further developed by setting and recording clearer personal outcomes and analysing strengths, barriers and risks as described in Part 3 of the Social Services and Wellbeing Act 2014. Pod meeting records should also be enhanced with a more explicit record of the pod conversations focusing on analysis and explicit actions to address risk**. **This area for improvement has already been recognised by managers, with training already planned.**

4.33 The local authority should ensure on-going development in the UASC team. This is a small team with recruitment imminent to fill PA posts. This will be important to provide practical support and life skills work. Broadening multi-agency support to this bespoke group of children should also be prioritised.

Prevention

Strengths

4.34 Professionals identify children in need of support and protection and report their concerns accordingly. Most partners considered there was good communication and an 'open door' for advice in children's services. Children's services practitioners said shared threshold understanding has improved; and shared understanding was mostly evident in our inspection activity with the exception of a few files reviewed. In these cases, there were differences in how agencies considered the best way to address complex family situations.

4.35 The Early Help and Assessment Team have timely what matters conversations to identify risks and actions. Most strategy discussions and section 47 enquiries take place in a timely way and involve the right agencies, who contribute well to decision making.

4.36 An Early Help Systems Thinking Review has been undertaken to build on foundations already in place and to develop the multi-agency approach to early help in the local authority. An Early Help hub is being developed where statutory and third sector partners work closely together to support families earlier, minimising duplication and addressing gaps in services.

4.37 A 14 -17 years, multi-agency pilot has been operational since summer 2024. Its aim is to provide early support for families to repair relationship breakdown and reduce the risk of youth homelessness. Phase two of the pilot will find ways to reach this age group and their families at an earlier stage than statutory interventions.

4.38 The emotional wellbeing team has a positive impact on people and enables families to achieve what is important to them through a therapeutic model and psychology support. This team also offers training to practitioners, therefore broadening the knowledge and skill set of the wider workforce. There are a number of services available to meet the emotional needs of children within schools such as the Looked After Children in Education (LACE) team, trauma informed practitioners, school counselling and educational psychology.

4.39 The local authority reports an increasing number of young people with neuro-developmental (ND) needs presenting with concurrent mental health needs who do not meet the threshold for statutory mental health services. In response to delays in assessment via the local health board, the local authority is developing a ND needs pathway to enable families to access the right help at the right time. A central part of this will be a focus on moving from diagnosis-led to needs led approach across agencies. Parents highlighted two critical areas of development in this area, young people in the 15/16 age group and at age 0-3 (diagnosis and transition period).

4.40 Parents have high regards for the quality of the short breaks service and identify this as significantly important to their well-being. This is an area currently under review by children's services given the current demand is outstripping available resource. It is positive to note carers assessments are being offered and undertaken. This provides an important and explicit focus on the role of carers and parents.

4.41 Llamau, commissioned by Dyfed-Powys Police is effective in offering all children and young people who have had a missing person episode a return home interview with parental consent. Llamau provides sessions with children, young people and their families and make onward referrals. There is good multi-agency working between Llamau and partner agencies and communication regarding frequent missing children and CLA.

Areas for Improvement

4.42 There are challenges finding placements that can meet some children's complex needs, with a small number of children currently placed in services providing care and support that are not registered as required by law. It is positive to note additional investment in children's residential care and a focus on developing local authority children's homes. **The local authority must continue to secure sufficient accommodation in the area for the children looked after in line with Part 6 Code of Practice on the exercise of social services functions in relation to Part 6 (looked after and accommodated children) of the Act.** We reviewed the

circumstances of a young person living at an unregistered setting due to difficulties in securing a suitable registered placement. The placement is delivering positive outcomes for the young person, enabling continued support from local services in Carmarthenshire.

4.43 In fostering services, **the local authority must continue working to improve the availability of foster carers to meet the needs of all children who require a foster placement.** It is acknowledged the local authority has commissioned an independent review of the fostering service. Following the review and CIW inspection earlier this year, an action plan has been implemented. It is positive to note additional investment in fostering services and a focus on marketing and recruitment.

4.44 There is demand for short break provision for disabled children, with waiting lists for services. Short breaks for parents and children with a disability is highly regarded by parents, but sometimes problematic as this support can be cancelled at very short notice due lack of provision and beds being taken up by urgent priorities. **The local authority must ensure sufficiency of suitable local placements and social, recreational, training and employment opportunities for children living with a disability. There is also a need to ensure transition planning is undertaken in a timely manner and a clear pathway developed for 19-25 years young people with a disability leaving further education.**

4.45 The local authority should ensure continued improvement in quality assurance measures. There are good data sets/performance management information available, but with some important gaps in live data available to managers. For example, understanding the frequency of visits to children named on the child protection register is unclear due to a reporting/recording issue. The frequency and quality of core groups also needs clarity. Not all core group meetings take place at the required frequency. Further work is required to ensure multi-agency core groups are consistently held within the required timeframe as these meetings are essential in reviewing and updating care and support protection plans. It is reassuring that managers currently receive data via a monthly performance report which is discussed at manager meetings.

4.46 The local authority has a new IT system due to be introduced shortly and it is envisaged this will provide improved reporting information and real time data for team managers to better manage key performance areas**. In the interim the local authority must maintain focus and scrutiny on ensuring compliance with all statutory responsibilities.**

Partnership

Strengths

4.47 Partnership is an area of positive practice based on constructive professional relationships evident across agencies. Leaders, managers, and

practitioners have a good understanding of the experiences of children and families that need help and protection.

4.48 Stakeholders spoke positively about their relationships with the local authority, one commented:

"*I would rate the partnership with social services as highly effective. There is a strong, collaborative relationship characterised by open communication, mutual respect, and a shared commitment to delivering the best outcomes for those we support. Social services are responsive, engaged, and proactive in addressing issues and coordinating services. This partnership has enabled us to provide more comprehensive, integrated support to individuals, enhancing the overall quality of care.*"

4.49 Thresholds are generally understood across partner agencies. Professionals identify children in need of help and protection and report their concerns accordingly. There are examples of appropriate referrals and duty to report records made by partner agencies.

4.50 Partners understand their roles and responsibilities in relation to safeguarding children. They demonstrate a positive focus and commitment to working with a child and family centred focus. Information is generally shared appropriately and in a timely manner, including when concerns are identified about children's safety. For example, positive partnership working is evident in the CLA process and Dash meetings (regular multi-agency meetings with a focus on domestic abuse context). It is positive to note children's services data from the recent period, April 2024 – June 2024, showed most child protection enquiries were joint investigations carried out by the police and children's services.

4.51 There is multi-agency attendance and participation in child protection meetings arranged under the Wales Safeguarding Procedures and CLA meetings.

Areas for Improvement

4.52 No areas for improvement under this principle

5. Next Steps

CIW expects the local authority to consider the areas identified for improvement and take appropriate action to address and improve these areas. CIW will monitor progress through its ongoing performance review activity with the local authority. Where relevant we expect the local authority to share the positive practice identified with other local authorities, to disseminate learning and help drive continuous improvement in statutory services throughout Wales.

6. Methodology

Fieldwork
- Most inspection evidence was gathered by reviewing the experiences of people through review and tracking of their social care record. We reviewed 29 social care records and tracked 5.
- Tracking a person's social care record includes having conversations with the person in receipt of social care services, their family or carers, key worker, the key worker's manager, and were appropriate other professionals involved.
- We engaged, through interviews and/or focus groups, with 16 people receiving services and/or their carer.
- We engaged, through interviews and/or focus groups with 48 local authority employees and the lead elected member for children's services.
- We engaged, through interviews and/or focus groups with 15 professionals from partner organisations.
- We reviewed a sample of staff supervision files.
- We observed one pod meeting.
- We reviewed supporting documentation sent to CIW for the purpose of the inspection.
- We administered surveys to local authority social services staff, partner organisations and people.

Our Privacy Notice can be found at https://careinspectorate.wales/how-we-use-your-information.

7. Welsh Language

CIW is committed to providing an active offer of the Welsh language during its activity with local authorities.

The active offer was not required on this occasion. This is because the local authority informed us that people taking part did not wish to contribute to this performance evaluation inspection in Welsh.

8. Acknowledgements

CIW would like to thank staff, partners and people who gave their time and contributed to this inspection.

Yours sincerely,

Lou Bushell-Bauers
Head of Local Authority Inspection
Care Inspectorate Wales

<u>**Appendix 1**</u>

Glossary of Terminology

Term	What we mean in our reports and letters
Must	Improvement is deemed necessary in order for the local authority to meet a duty outlined in legislation, regulation or code of practice. The local authority is not currently meeting its statutory duty/duties and must take action.
Should	Improvement will enhance service provision and/or outcomes for people and/or their carer. It does not constitute a failure to meet a legal duty at this time; but without suitable action, there is a risk the local authority may fail to meet its legal duty/duties in future.
Positive practice	Identified areas of strength within the local authority. This relates to practice considered innovative and/or which consistently results in positive outcomes for people receiving statutory services.
Prevention and Early Intervention	A principle of the Act which aims to ensure that there is access to support to prevent situations from getting worse, and to enhance the maintenance of individual and collective well-being. This principle centres on increasing preventative services within communities to minimise the escalation of critical need.
Voice and Control	A principle of the Act which aims to put the individual and their needs at the centre of their care and support, and giving them a voice in, and control over, the outcomes that can help them achieve well-being and the things that matter most to them.

Well-being	A principle of the Act which aims for people to have well-being in every part of their lives. Well-being is more than being healthy. It is about being safe and happy, having choice and getting the right support, being part of a strong community, having friends and relationships that are good for you, and having hobbies, work or learning. It is about supporting people to achieve their own well-being and measuring the success of care and support.
Co-Production	A principle of the Act which aims for people to be more involved in the design and provision of their care and support. It means organisations and professionals working with them and their family, friends and carers so their care and support is the best it can be.
Multi-Agency working	A principle of the Act which aims to strengthen joint working between care and support organisations to make sure the right types of support and services are available in local communities to meet people's needs. The summation of the Act states that there is a requirement for co-operation and partnership by public authorities.
What matters	'What Matters' conversations are a way for professionals to understand people's situation, their current well-being, and what can be done to support them. It is an equal conversation and is important to help ensure the voice of the individual or carer is heard and 'what matters' to them