



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

National Inspection Safeguarding and Care Planning of looked after children and care leavers, who exhibit vulnerable or risky behaviours

Inspection of Bridgend County Borough Council

1.0. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. This report provides an overview of inspection findings in respect of:
Safeguarding and care planning of looked after children and care leavers who exhibit vulnerable or risky behaviour, within Bridgend County Borough Council.
- 1.2. The inspection was carried out as part of Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW) national thematic inspection programme. The methodology for the review included three and a half days fieldwork in each local authority across Wales, between January and May 2014.
- 1.3. The aim of the national inspection was to assess the quality of care planning across Wales and whether it effectively:
 - Supports and protects looked after children and care leavers;
 - Identifies and manages the vulnerabilities and risky behaviour of looked after children and care leavers;
 - Promotes rights based practice and the voice of the child;
 - Promotes improved outcomes for looked after children and care leavers;
 - Promotes compliance with policy and guidance
- 1.4. Findings from the individual local authority inspections will inform a CSSIW national overview report to be published later this year.

2. THE INSPECTION

- 2.1 The inspection focused on the work undertaken with looked after children over eleven years of age and care leavers who were identified as being vulnerable and/or involved in risky behaviours, against defined criteria.
- 2.2 It is important to recognise that given this focus the case sample reviewed in each local authority encompassed some of the most challenging and complex case management issues and represented only a small cohort of each authority's wider looked after children and care leaving population.
- 2.3 As well as inspecting cases in respect of the assessment, care planning and review systems the inspection also considered the extent to which the corporate parenting, management and partnership arrangements acted to promote improved outcomes for looked after children and care leavers. Also how organisational structures including, workforce, resources, advocacy and quality assurance mechanisms impacted on the quality of care planning.

The inspection considered these areas against the following five questions.

A summary of our findings is presented below

QUESTION 1

Did the authority effectively discharge its corporate parenting roles and responsibilities promoting the stability, welfare and safety of looked after children and care leavers?

POSITIVES

- Children's services were recognised as a corporate priority. The authority had articulated its commitment to looked after children and care leavers in a corporate parenting policy statement and there was a strong emphasis on collaborative working. The corporate parenting arrangements were well embedded through a Corporate Parenting cabinet committee, attended by all cabinet members with good cross directorate senior officer representation. The committee had a strong focus on the well being and progress of looked after children.
- Officers and members, including the children and young people 's overview and scrutiny committee, had undertaken considerable work to interrogate the on-going rise in the looked after children population. The authority was investing in both early intervention strategies and mechanisms to reduce the need for children to become looked after and secure permanency for those children already looked after. Members and officers were cognisant of the complexity of the agendas and of the need to promote good outcomes for looked after children whilst managing the recognised resource pressures.
- The authority's performance information systems were well developed providing officers, members and partners with an overview of the looked after children and care leaving population. Systems also monitored compliance against issues such as young people not in education and employment (NEET). Senior officers were well informed about individual looked after children's vulnerability. Mechanisms such as the placement panel and out of authority panel supported officers and partner oversight of placement demand.
- Although the authority had undergone a number of changes at corporate director level the overall structural arrangement locating children's social services and education within a directorate for Children's Services were well established. The interface between the children's directorate and that of the Wellbeing directorate had been strengthened through the development of a strategic Improvement board.
- Work had been undertaken across social services, education and with schools to ensure a greater shared focus on looked after children. There were good working relationships between the Just Ask Plus team and that of the youth service. Some schools were recognised as less receptive to the admission of

looked after children and the authority had developed support initiatives such as the 'buddy systems' between schools.

- The Safeguarding Children Board (SCB) had moved to a regional footprint of the Western Bay Safeguarding Children Board (WBSCB). Although still relatively new the board had undertaken work to develop shared information and quality assurance systems. The board was live to the need for effective oversight of safeguarding practice in relation to looked after children and had recently completed a review of its arrangements for managing 'risky behaviors'.
- Children's services workforce was recognised as a priority, which was being taken forward through a subgroup of the Strategic Improvement Board. The authority reported that all but a small number of looked after children were allocated to a social workers Front line teams remained highly dependent on newly qualified or relatively inexperienced social work staff. The authority had recently restructured to increase the number of fieldwork teams to improve workflow and reduce caseloads.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- Elected members had recognised the significance of both their safeguarding and corporate parenting role and the need to provide greater challenge to ensure that they are achieving best outcomes for looked after children and care leavers, including the most vulnerable and challenging. Members needed to assure themselves that strategic aims are being effectively owned and translated into action across the local authority and partner agencies
- The authority's systems did not routinely capture a profile of the looked after children and care-leaving populations assessed needs or detailed thematic information regarding vulnerability and risk. This information is essential if the authority is to evaluate the effectiveness of its placement and permanency strategies and predict future resource needs. The reports reviewed in relation to looked after children often relied on extensive use of data and lacked a clear analysis in respect of the issues identified, action needed and how progress would be evaluated.
- Children's services had developed multi agency panel arrangements, including an out of authority panel, to co-ordinate access to placements and promote effective permanency and care planning. These arrangements were viewed as a useful approach but staff expressed frustration that these mechanisms had different information requirements.
- Despite their multi agency nature, the panels had little ability to accelerate access to services In some case the oversight of the panel was viewed as delaying decision making while not ensuring effective contingency planning that, for example, prevented the need for emergency placement or ensured timely transition planning for young people leaving out of authority placements.

The panel arrangements would benefit from being refreshed to ensure timely oversight of issues and escalation of cases. The information presented to the panels could contribute to a more detailed profile of presenting need

- Children's social services were working with both the Well Being directorate and Housing Directorate to strengthen young people's access to services. Although some progress had been made for example to improve the interface between children's services and adult mental health, more work was needed to agree service thresholds. The interface between children's social services and housing had been significantly strengthened, for example, through the inclusion of housing staff as part of the 'Just Ask Plus' service. Despite some positive developments the availability of appropriate 'move on housing and accommodation for looked after young people and care leavers was identified as a gap by staff and service users. Given the known age profile of the looked after children population this is an area that will require ongoing cross directorate focus.
- Despite some good operational engagement the authority's relationship with health services appeared overly dependent on children's social services providing funding and resources to assess and meet the therapeutic needs of looked after children and care leavers.

QUESTION 2

Were care and pathway plans informed by relevant assessments, including explicit risk assessments, which supported a comprehensive response to the needs and experiences of children and young people?

POSITIVES

- Referral and information sharing processes between professionals were well embedded. Operational relationships between teams including the Youth Offending Service and partner agencies support communication. Social workers and their managers had a good understanding of the young people they worked with including knowledge of presenting vulnerabilities and risky behaviours.
- The authority had expanded the multi agency nature of its specialist post 16 support and the 'Just Ask Plus' service included a drop in center that provided access to employment, health and, substance misuse advice. Case responsibility for looked after children transferred to this service when the young person reached 16years old. As with any transfer arrangement the authority needs to ensure that young people are engaged in the process and that the timing of any change is sensitive to the young persons needs.
- Care leavers were generally positive about the support they received from their personal advisors, although they did not always understanding the difference in

roles and planning mechanisms. Care leavers found the practical focus of pathway plans helpful but experienced decision making in relation to financial and resource issues as slow and inconsistent.

- The work of the looked after children educational support service (LACES) was valued including the ability to directly negotiate and resolve issues within schools. Personal Education Plans were seen on file although the timeliness and quality of these were variable. Educational attainment was valued and promoted, for example, through university-mentoring schemes but not seen as the only measure of achievement. School stability was a priority and considerable efforts were made to maintain school placements despite placement disruption. However, this should be balanced with the young persons need to make community links.
- The young people interviewed valued the support they received from the looked after nurse and could describe interventions provided by the service including advice re diet, healthy eating and sexual health. The looked after children's nurse also provided training for foster carers in relation to these issues. Although health assessments for looked after children were generally compliant the updated information was not always well reflected in the care plan.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- From the cases seen it was identified that the care plans of young people who remain looked after for longer periods were not routinely informed by a relevant shared written assessment. Where assessments were undertaken some good information gathering was evident but the quality of the analysis remained variable. It was however positive that the authority had recently refreshed the use of progress and action records.
- There was an insufficient range of placements available including those accessed through external providers. The authority had been proactive in working to increase the number of foster carers able to meet the complex needs of young people but this remained an on-going challenge.
- Although staff recognised and were active in relation to identifying risk, such issues often appeared to be managed as separate episodes, risk assessments and risk assessment tools were available and used but the resulting actions were not clearly recorded or shared. In some cases changes in staff and placements resulted in a loss of continuity and it was difficult to know if issues had been effectively concluded.
- There was recognition of a long standing disconnect between the access threshold applied by the CAMHS service and the presenting emotional resilience needs of looked after children and care leavers. Although some CAMHS advice was available through a weekly surgery and also the Just Ask Plus service there was a considerable waiting list for CAMHS intervention. Staff

highlighted that the lack of such support services for young people and their carers adversely impacted on the sustainability of placements.

- The quality of care plans seen were variable. Most included broad overarching statements but did not articulate the objectives and how the desired outcomes for the young person were to be achieved. There was a lack of clarity about the responsibility for updating the care plan.
- Issues were raised regarding the quality and impact of therapeutic interventions provided by some out of authority placements and the need for greater quality assurance mechanisms.

QUESTION 3

Were operational systems and procedures in place that ensured responsive coordinated action was taken to mitigate risk and achieve safe continuity of care?

POSITIVES

- Staff had access to key policies and there were well-developed information systems in place to support oversight of compliance in respect of statutory child protection procedures.
- Child protection processes were being used appropriately to manage risk for this group of young people.
- The authority and the Safeguarding Children Board had acted to heighten awareness of the vulnerabilities of looked after children and care leavers, including children missing from placement. Training in respect of a sexual exploitation risk assessment framework (seraf) had been incorporated into core child protection training. The chair of the WBSCB had written to all partner agencies in respect of individual agency compliance regarding child sexual exploitation. The intention being that the analysis of responses would be used to inform the boards future work plan.
- There appeared to be an effective working relationship with the police. Staff described a proactive response to children missing from placement, the police Misper coordinator carried out return to placement interviews and provided feedback. The police had provided advice to establishments, in relation to child sexual exploitation.
- Staff stated that they were confident of their role and responsibilities in relation to child protection and safeguarding including where the risks resulted from the young persons own behaviour.
- The frequency of supervision was formally monitored through performance

management systems. However some staff reported that time constraints impacted on their ability to discuss cases fully and the quality of the supervision seen was variable.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- Although statutory child protection procedures and thresholds were generally well understood the management pathway for looked after young people and care leavers exhibiting 'risky' behaviours needed greater clarity.
- The assessment and management of risk particularly when involving more than one agency needed to be more effectively recorded and shared. The progress made in mitigating risk was not always evaluated or recorded. It was not apparent the extent to which young people were directly involved in the process.
- Managers were described as approachable and staff reported that there was oversight of cases within the service. However, contingency planning, including in relation to risk management, was not well evidenced.
- The authority had recently restructured services and the support for looked after children, prior to attaining 16 years of age, was now provided by five safeguarding teams. Social workers reported that although this had reduced case loads, the generic nature of their work meant that child protection and court work had to take priority. Some staff stated that they did not have capacity to undertake direct planned work.
- Despite a strong commitment to training, staff reported that case pressures did not always enable them to attend training. The level of caseload protection provided for social workers in the first year of practice was also said to be dependant on work load pressures.

QUESTION 4

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

POSITIVES

- The authority's independent reviewing arrangements were compliant with guidance. Reviews were generally timely and convened as needed to reflect the presenting circumstances of the young person.
- Young people told us that they were encouraged to attend their reviews and there was evidence that advocates were available and had supported or represented young person's views at reviews.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- Looked after children reviews generally appeared overly focused on the immediate needs of the young people and gave insufficient weight to securing better outcomes over the longer term.
- The IROs were not confident that the significance of their role was understood or that they were routinely made aware of changes or events that potentially impacted on the relevance of the care plan.
- Although some staff experienced reviews as providing challenge, this was not evident on case files and IROs felt unable to exert necessary influence. Lack of progress against the care plan, even in the most complex cases, needs to be effectively challenged. Any blockages to care plan objectives particularly in relation to placement stability and also leaving care arrangements should be pro actively monitored and escalated if they cannot be resolved within appropriate timescales.
- IROs did not routinely meet with young people prior to reviews and evidence from files identified that review minutes were subject to significantly delayed.
- The authority's understanding and oversight of its lac population would benefit from better coordinated of its quality assurance systems. An IRO monitoring form had recently been reintroduced but this again mainly reflected compliance issues. The authority were in the process of addressing these issues.

QUESTION 5

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

POSITIVES

- The authority had independent advocacy arrangements in place and had given significant priority to the development of this service. There was evidence that advocacy was discussed at looked after children reviews. All young people seen during the inspection were aware of the service and those who had used it were positive about the outcomes.
- Some young people said that they liked their placement and felt it was well planned and well matched, and that their carers listened to them.
- Care leavers were positive about the 'drop in' center provided through the 'Just Ask Plus' service and experienced this as a positive listening service. Personal advisors were viewed as strong advocates for young people.
- Despite some mixed views children and young people generally experienced professionals as persistent in their efforts to engage them and to try to ensure their

voices were heard.

- The authority had developed work placement traineeships and apprenticeship schemes for looked after young people and care leavers. These schemes sought to improve opportunities for employment and financial independence. Further support for young people in relation to work readiness was also available through the 'Just Ask Plus' service.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- Some young people said they liked their social worker and there was a view that they 'did their best'. Generally however, looked after children identified that they didn't see their social worker enough, found them hard to contact and slow to return calls. Care leavers were able to compare this level of service with what they felt was the good communication and responsiveness they currently experienced from their personal advisors.
- Looked after children and care leavers said that they felt they had little choice or ability to exert influence around placements or accommodation. Although these views need to be balanced against the authority's child protection responsibilities to take protective action.
- Young people highlighted the significant impact changes of social workers and placement had on their ability to form trusting relationships.
- While young people were able to participate in sporting and leisure activities this often depended on the support provided by the carers and continuity of placement. Young people raised issues regarding speed of consent and inconsistent funding decisions.
- Young people had mixed views regarding whether they would like opportunities to meet together. Care leavers believed that their insight into being 'looked after' could be better utilised by the authority to support others.