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Ein cyf / Our ref: BCBC IC 23/06/2025

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Dear Director,

This letter describes the findings of our Improvement Check (IC) visit to Bridgend County Borough Council (BCBC) children's services, in June 2025.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) completed a Performance Evaluation Inspection in May 2022. In December 2022 we completed an IC to follow-up on areas for improvement and noted the *'local authority must continue to assure itself of the priority status, pace, quality, delivery, and impact of its improvement activity'*.
- 1.2 In June 2023 CIW and partner inspectorates carried out a Joint Inspection of Child Protection Arrangements (JICPA) in Bridgend. We found leaders and partners had a shared vision and positive approach to safeguarding. The local authority and partners had taken action to instigate learning following critical incidents, there were ambitious plans to drive forward improvements, and it was important to manage these changes with careful oversight.
- 1.3 CIW carry out inspection activity in accordance with the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and the quality standards in the *Code of Practice in relation to the performance and improvement of social services in Wales*. This helps us determine the effectiveness of local authorities in supporting, measuring and sustaining improvements for people.
- 1.4 This IC focused on progress made in the areas for improvement, which were identified during the inspection activities of 2022 and 2023. The table below summarises our findings and further details are available throughout the report.

Principle	Areas of improvement identified in 2022-23	Progress identified at this Improvement Check
People	Seeking, hearing and recording the voice of the child	Improvements made and must be sustained
People	People consistently feel listened to and treated with dignity and respect	Some improvements made – further action is required
People	Workforce recruitment and retention	Improvements made and must be sustained
People	Recording demographics and associates	Improvements made and must be sustained
People	Management oversight	Improvements made and must be sustained
People	Staff support, supervision, and training	Improvements made and must be sustained
Prevention	Provision of information, advice, and assistance (IAA). People receive the right support at the right time	Some improvements made – further action is required
Prevention	Placement sufficiency	Some improvements made – further action is required
Partnerships	Thresholds for early help and statutory services	Improvements made and must be sustained
Partnerships	Learning from reviews and audits	Improvements made and must be sustained
Well-being	Compliance with statutory responsibilities	Improvements made and must be sustained
Well-being	Arrangements for supervised contact between children and their families	Improvements made and must be sustained
Well-being	Identification and response to child exploitation	Some improvements made – further action is required
Well-being	Ensuring priority status, pace, quality, delivery, and impact of its improvement activity	Improvements made and must be sustained

2. Glossary of Terminology and Quantity Definitions

A glossary of terminology is contained in Appendix one and a table of quantity definitions in Appendix two.

3. Summary of Improvement Check Findings

- 3.1 BCBC leaders have consistently prioritised children's services, to support sustained and timely improvements. This has significantly strengthened the quality and delivery of social services functions. The local authority has moved from having a fragile workforce and critical deficits in capacity, to an overall position of stability. This is the most significant change made since 2022-23, which underpins the local authority's capacity to drive forward and sustain improvements. **This positive improvement has been achieved through sustained focus on workforce well-being and practice quality.**
- 3.2 The local authority promotes learning and takes action to make improvements in a timely way. Following critical events, the local authority has prioritised improvements with safeguarding arrangements. The JICPA 2023 found the Bridgend Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) facilitates adherence to the Wales Safeguarding Procedures (WSP) and encourages close partnership working between agencies, but further improvements were needed in respect of IT systems which support information sharing and the sufficiency of partner resource. These improvements have been made, with an improved IT system and sufficient partner resource in place.
- 3.3 In 2023-24 leaders developed their 3-year strategic plan for child and family services¹ (entitled 'Think Family') and a detailed business case for additional funding. This received corporate support from council and enabled the development of additional posts, including five Principal Officers (PO) who support case management teams, implement family support strategies, oversee early help services, oversee commissioning and placements, and drive the transformation of child and family services. There is also a Signs of Safety (SoS) consultant and officers to drive forward practice in relation to quality assurance, policy, and corporate parenting/participation. **The robust corporate and political support for child and family is positive practice, which has made a significant contribution to improved outcomes for people.**
- 3.4 The local authority is embedding new arrangements for an integrated IAA, early help, locality (place-based teams working within communities) social work, locality early intervention and edge of care services. **This positive change is supporting to improve outcomes for people, whilst reducing demand for**

¹ Think Family - Improving Outcomes for Children and Families in Bridgend

statutory services. This is creating capacity for an improved focus on practice standards for children who need care and support. In this context, practitioners are consistently meeting statutory duties, and child protection processes are generally in line with requirements of the WSP.

- 3.5 Improvements in practice quality are driven by a 5-stage implementation plan for the SoS methodology. SoS is built on a set of principles and values that are solution focused, strengths based, and safety orientated². Whilst practice remains variable, leaders are working with staff to build skills and confidence, and the consistency of practice is improving. Whilst it will take time to embed this organisational change, practitioners are developing a shared understanding of practice standards. The local authority should strengthen implementation through improved focus on supporting partner agencies to understand and embed approaches within their own organisations. Leaders are aware of this issue and the PO for transformation has plans to strengthen communication strategies and training opportunities, in collaboration with partner agencies.
- 3.6 Leaders and practitioners have demonstrated sustained commitment and focus on securing improvements. This is complimented by constructive relationships with partners and a commissioned programme of independent advice and quality assurance. When combined with robust quality assurance activities, this provides assurance that areas for improvement will be identified and monitored in a timely way.

4. Key Findings and Evidence

Key findings and some examples of evidence are presented below in line with the four principles of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014.

People - We asked:

How well is the local authority ensuring that people have a say in their lives and can achieve what matters to them? How effective are leaders at developing a stable, highly skilled, well qualified, and supported workforce?

Strengths

- 4.1 The local authority has co-produced a corporate parenting strategy with care experienced young people, in the Bridgend Youth Forum. These young people have been fully involved in selecting priorities and the design and content of the strategy. The approach taken is 'nothing about you without you' and BCBC is committed to meaningful participation in all aspects of corporate parenting.
- 4.2 Improvements in practice quality are dependent on the sufficiency and efficacy of the workforce. In 2023 41% of the local authority workforce were agency

² What Is Signs of Safety? - Signs of Safety

staff, including a managed agency team which was in place for over 2 years. Through sustained improvements, the local authority ensures practitioners typically work with fewer than 20 children. 'Think Family' prioritised a 'Grow your Own' programme for social work and there will be 12 Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSW) appointed next year. Leaders explored opportunities for enhanced marketing campaigns, including international recruitment, and received a Social Care Wales accolade in 2025 for developing and inspiring the workforce³. In August 2024 the local authority successfully exited the arrangement for a managed agency team, and agency staff accounted for 7% of the workforce in June 2025. **This is a significant change which demonstrates their recruitment and retention strategy is delivering desired outcomes.**

- 4.3 Nearly all staff describe a significant culture shift in the last 2-3 years. This is characterised by an increasingly reflective and collaborative approach across all teams. This shift has improved staff morale, with teams developing a strong sense of collaboration and shared purpose. Our staff survey response was highly positive, with 86% indicating they would recommend working in BCBC to a friend. Leaders are described as compassionate, committed, and focused on workforce well-being. **This positive practice has significantly improved workforce recruitment, retention, and workforce stability.**
- 4.4 The workforce includes many international and newly qualified social workers, who need time and support to develop experience. The local authority has implemented a case consultation process, which supports practitioners to access senior management oversight and consultation in complex situations. Operational management complete personal supervision in a timely way and teams consistently use SoS and reflective spaces to promote outcome focused interventions. The quality of case supervision would be strengthened further with improved focus on the child's lived experience, outcome focused actions, follow-up, and evidence of reflective discussions.
- 4.5 Leaders and managers have a strong understanding of service strengths and areas for improvement. The local authority implemented a system for enhanced scrutiny and compliance monitoring following critical events and child practice reviews. Since that time, oversight has been strengthened further with an increasing focus on quality and a quality assurance framework supports oversight of agreed practice standards, reflection, and learning. **This positive practice strengthens the local authority's ability to evaluate how service delivery impacts people's outcomes.**
- 4.6 Practitioners are positive about training and how this supports their professional development. SoS training is valued, and the training department demonstrate an innovative approach to practice improvement. For example, the SoS method has been adapted to use an alternative approach for Care Experienced

³ [2025 Accolades awards ceremony, winners and... | Social Care Wales](#)

Children (CEC), namely Signs of Stability. **This positive practice is valued by staff and supports to develop workforce efficacy.**

- 4.7 Practitioners are increasingly seeking and hearing the voice of the child and leaders have retained focus on improving practice in this area. We found good examples of Signs of Safety being used to promote child centred approaches to direct work with children. This includes regular use of direct work tools, such as 'three houses' and 'words and pictures'. Practice would be strengthened with consistency and increased focus on how the voice of the child is impacting assessments, plans and outcomes.

Areas for improvement

- 4.8 The Signs of Safety methodology promotes a relationship grounded and strength-based approach to practice. Leaders are embedding this organisational change in a phased way and sustained improvements are evident. However, practice remains variable and some teams are further ahead with improvements, than others. This means some children and families are experiencing the impact of improvements more than others. For example, when safeguarding arrangements work well, professionals work with the whole family and their network to co-produce safety plans and reduce risks in a timely way. When it works less well, family strengths are not identified or utilised, and plans become service led. In some files we also found fathers should have been involved sooner in assessments and plans. **Leaders are aware of this issue and should retain focus on achieving consistent practice, across all staff and teams.**

Prevention - We asked:

How well is the local authority preventing the need for care and support and ensuring the best outcomes for people? How effective are service developments at ensuring people receive the right support at the right time?

Strengths

- 4.9 The IAA team is responsible for receiving contacts and referrals, providing advice and assistance, assessing needs, and undertaking safeguarding enquiries. The MASH acts as the single point of contact for all new safeguarding concerns and brings together staff from BCBC, education, police, and health services. IAA and MASH work closely together, with a shared focus on improving access and pathways to support. **The partnership working and collaboration of agencies in the MASH is positive practice.**
- 4.10 In 2023–24, leaders developed their 3-year strategic plan for C&F services, entitled 'Think Family'. This committed the Council to introducing new arrangements for an integrated IAA, early help, locality social work, locality early intervention and edge of care services. A commissioning strategy was

implemented to drive improvement and investment across this continuum of support. Family support services were integrated with Children and Family Services, while education engagement and pupil support services remained the responsibility of the education directorate.

- 4.11 Whilst the impact of these changes is the subject of ongoing review, early indicators appear positive. For example, in November 2023-2024 there was a 16% reduction in the total number of children allocated to specialist teams, including a 48% reduction in child protection allocations. Practitioners reported increased confidence and improved decision-making through shared expertise and closer collaboration. Most importantly, exit surveys indicate nearly all people receiving early help services feel more able to make positive changes, reporting improved resilience, having better emotional well-being and family relationships, and being more confident to support their child's development. Similarly, 92% of children supported by edge of care services in 2024-25 were successfully prevented from entering the care system. **This is positive practice which indicates need is being met in a timely way, whilst reducing the need for care and support.**

Areas for improvement

- 4.12 The local authority works closely with an improvement partner to review service outcomes and areas for development. This process highlighted the need for family support to streamline systems, develop more intensive targeted support, and reform parenting support. There are some vacancies in key posts and gaps in service sufficiency, including services for adolescents, mental health, emotional well-being, neurodiversity, and vacancies for specialist exploitation workers and the integrated family support service. These gaps have led to some delays in people receiving timely support, and we identified examples where contingency planning for ending support could be improved. **Recruitment is underway, and leaders should continue to develop services in line with their Family Support Commissioning Strategy. The local authority should also review its communication strategy to ensure staff and partners are clear about available services and referral pathways.**
- 4.13 Leaders are working through local and national challenges, to develop placement sufficiency for supported accommodation and regulated services. A Children, Young Person and Transition Commissioning Strategy 2023-2028 outlines plans for improvement, but there remains a projected gap in sufficiency beyond 2028. The general shortage of foster carers and the specific shortage of skilled foster carers and residential care homes who can care for children with the greatest needs, are of particular concern. **Leaders should continue to implement plans in the local authority commissioning strategy, to support timely improvements.**

- 4.14 Whilst placements Operating without Registration (OWR) are only used in exceptional circumstances, and their use is reducing, there are a small number of children who are placed in services providing care and support that are not registered as required by law. **The local authority must ensure children are not placed in unregistered services and must continue its efforts to identify suitable, registered placements.**
- 4.15 Placement sufficiency in foster care is partly dependent on the support for carers and the local authority approach to retention. Leaders have plans to improve approaches with matching, training, and placement support. The fostering service and Care Experienced Children Team (CECT) have recently appointed permanent managers, and practitioners report improved practice and morale. Whilst the fostering service and CECT are increasingly working together to strengthen placement stability, foster carers report mixed views about the impact and sustainability of these changes. **Leaders should ensure the fostering service and CECT retain priority focus, to ensure improvements are made in a timely way.**

Well-being – We asked:

How well is the local authority protecting people from abuse and neglect? How effective are service developments at addressing priority areas for improvement to safeguard children?

Strengths

- 4.16 The local authority responds to safeguarding enquiries in a timely way and responds to referrers as required in the WSP. Partners are consistently invited and contribute to the safeguarding process. Nearly all children receive visits in line with the requirements of the WSP, and child protection conferences and CEC Reviews are timely. The local authority has addressed improvements required from the JICPA and ensures minutes and plans are shared following these meetings. Core groups would be strengthened further if meetings were consistently in person and with improved focus on developing the outline plan from conference.
- 4.17 Practitioners mostly identify and make the active offer of advocacy. It is positive the offer of formal advocacy is expanding, and parental advocacy is now considered alongside advocacy for children. We saw examples of Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) checking and ensuring children were provided with the active offer. Despite this, the uptake of advocacy is somewhat lower than expected and leaders are working with practitioners to better understand this issue. We identified examples where the offer of parental advocacy would have been appropriate and was not considered. However, informal advocacy is

nearly always available to parents in the safeguarding process, when formal advocacy is not offered or accepted.

- 4.18 The local authority has developed a central contact team who support supervised contact for CEC and children subject to the Public Law Outline (PLO) process. This dedicated resource is significantly improving the timeliness and quality of contact, whilst creating capacity for practitioners to focus on care and support planning.
- 4.19 Leaders have developed an effective Assuring Quality and Learning Framework to systemically monitor and evaluate practice. This aims to support learning and development, improved practice, and the best possible outcomes for people. An essential element of the framework is to promote critical thinking and professional curiosity through meaningful feedback from practitioners, partners, and people with lived experience. For example, staff complete appreciative enquiries⁴, and leaders have recently adopted the Most Significant Change⁵ method to hear people's stories and develop an understanding of how and when change happens for people. **This positive practice is rolling out across all teams and leaders should continue to support this advanced approach to learning and quality assurance.**

Areas for improvement

- 4.20 Leaders are aware of increasing concerns regarding the exploitation of children and the impact of online harm. A regional strategy was co-produced with people and partners in April 2025. Regional practice guidance, training, prevention panels, and tools were created for implementation. A local multi-agency plan has clear actions and a governance structure to oversee improvements. This includes exploitation training for the workforce and multi-agency partners. The local authority has invested in 3 specialist posts, which will strengthen the strategic and operational response to these concerns. This is a significant improvement following the JICPA 2023, and these developments are beginning to strengthen practice and management oversight. However, the strategy is not yet fully embedded, and there remains inconsistencies in how exploitation is identified across agencies. **Leaders should continue to embed consistent approaches to safeguarding children from exploitation. This should include continuing to explore opportunities for multi-agency training, reflection, and shared learning.**
- 4.21 Whilst the local authority generally records demographics and associates, we found case recordings were not always completed in a timely or consistent manner. Records should be accurate, objective, understandable, complete, and up-to-date. They should fully reflect and respect the views of the person

⁴ A strengths-based approach to creating change. This involves listening to the experiences of people, exploring what is already working, and how to build on that.

⁵ Deep handbook Eng.pdf

concerned, contain an appropriate level of analysis to support decisions made, and evidence sound professional judgement and decision making. **Leaders should work with practitioners to develop and embed agreed standards for record keeping.**

- 4.22 Whilst many assessments and plans provide a detailed summary of service interventions and next steps, there is a loss of focus on proportionality and analysis of need. Some assessments and plans would be strengthened with an improved focus on risk, harm, strengths, safety, the voice of the child, and outcomes. It is particularly important the child and significant family members are consistently included in this process and plans are co-produced. SoS provides an opportunity for family network meetings and safety plans to reduce escalations through this strength-based approach. Leaders are working with staff to build skills and confidence, and the consistency of practice is improving. **Leaders should continue to review the quality of assessments and plans and share learning to support practice improvements.**
- 4.23 The IRO service is piloting the SoS approach in child protection case conferences. This provides an opportunity to make the conference process more inclusive, and strength based. Parents/caregivers are actively encouraged to attend and contribute. However, the voice of the child, their lived experience and their wishes and feelings could be heard in a more impactful way. **Subject to their age and level of understanding, children must be invited and supported to take part in meetings held in line with the WSP; and all meetings held in line with child protection processes should start with the child's story⁶.**
- 4.24 Recordings for case conference do not sufficiently focus on the information recorded being understood by family members. **The written record of conference is a crucial working document and leaders should ensure record keeping is in line with the requirements of the WSP.**
- 4.25 The IRO service plans to review the SoS pilot and will seek the views of family members, as part of this process. **Leaders should continue to ensure improvements to the conference process are co-produced with people.**

Partnership - We asked:

How well are partners working together to deliver high-quality, sustainable outcomes for people? How well have strategic partnerships continued to work together, to secure continuous improvements?

Strengths

- 4.26 We saw collaborative partnership working at operational and strategic levels. This is critical to ensure improvements are delivered and sustained, and the

⁶ [Full report - Rapid Review of Child Protection Arrangements FINAL FOR PUBLICATION](#)

well-being of children and families is consistently promoted and protected.
Leaders have a positive professional support network from which it can draw expertise, knowledge, support, and constructive challenge.

- 4.27 Effective and mature partnership arrangements between agencies are supporting a coordinated multi-agency response to safeguarding concerns.
There is a positive focus on safeguarding across the local authority. A culture of safeguarding is promoted as everyone's collective responsibility.
- 4.28 Leaders have responded to areas for improvement identified through inspection activities. The initial response prioritised improvements required with workforce stability and safeguarding arrangements. Subsequent priorities included improvements to early help and prevention, fostering services, and contact arrangements. The local authority has also worked with partners to embed SoS and strengthen commissioned arrangements. Whilst some improvements are more established than others, leaders have retained focus on priorities and sought to maintain and sustain progress. **There has been a positive approach to change management.**
- 4.29 The local authority and multi-agency partners have developed an improved understanding of threshold for referrals into the MASH. MASH have developed a professionals advice line for discussions about safeguarding concerns.
Partners told us the professional advice line has had a positive impact. This is positive practice.
- 4.30 Operational partners work well together and there is confidence in decision making for safeguarding. This is supported by effective systems for escalation and a healthy culture of professional challenge. For example, fortnightly MASH interface meetings and a Joint Operational Group (JOG) provide opportunity for multi-agency reflection and constructive challenge. **This is positive practice and leaders should continue to strengthen these arrangements.**

Areas for improvement

- 4.31 The local authority has brought the majority of early help services into the Child and Family directorate, from the Education directorate. This change has been well received by most staff and is supporting improved discussions about prevention and thresholds for care and support. However, some staff would benefit from an improved understanding of these changes. **Leaders should continue to work with education partners to develop a shared understanding of roles and responsibilities.**
- 4.32 There is draft regional guidance on thresholds for care and support. This was developed with multi-agency partners and is nearing publication. **Leaders**

should continue to work with partners locally and regionally, to implement threshold guidance in a timely and robust way.

- 4.33 Partners identified some inconsistent practice in relation to exploitation, professional concerns, and the operational response to the Children (Abolition of Defence of Reasonable Punishment) (Wales) Act 2020. **Leaders should continue to work with partners and seek feedback on these specific areas of practice, to ensure improvements are made in a timely way.**
- 4.34 Some partners would welcome further multi-agency training in respect of SoS, exploitation, thresholds, and safeguarding. **Leaders should continue to work with partners to develop an agreed approach to multi-agency training and practice.**
- 4.35 The Cwm Taf Morgannwg Emergency Duty Team (EDT) covers Bridgend, Merthyr Tydfil, and Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT). The service must provide help in a crisis to vulnerable adults, children in need and their families. Partners and practitioners reported challenges with staff sufficiency, record keeping, and practice. **Leaders should work with regional partners to review these arrangements and promote improvements in a timely way.**

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 24 people through review and tracking of their social care record. We reviewed 21 social care records and tracked 3
- 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 where appropriate other professionals involved
- We engaged, through interviews, observations and/or focus groups, with 8 people receiving services and/or their carer
- We engaged, through interviews and/or focus groups with 48 local authority employees (this included social workers, team managers, operational and strategic managers, the head of service, and director of social services)
- We interviewed a range of partner organisations
- We reviewed a sample of staff supervision files

- We observed reflective sessions and an initial child protection case conference
- 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

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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 people taking part did not wish to contribute to this improvement check in Welsh.

8. Acknowledgements

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

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Lou Bushell-Bauers', written in a cursive style.

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

Appendix 1

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 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 and control over their outcomes. This can help them achieve their well-being outcomes 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 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.

Appendix 2

Quantity Definitions Table

Terminology	Definition
Nearly all	With very few exceptions
Most	90% or more
Many	70% or more
A majority	Over 60%
Half	50%
Around half	Close to 50%
A minority	Below 40%
Few	Below 20%
Very few	Less than 10%