

Monmouthshire County Council Performance Evaluation Inspection Children's Services



Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.
This document is also available in Welsh.

Introduction

Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) carried out a performance evaluation inspection of Monmouthshire County Council's (MCC/the local authority) Social Services in February 2024. This was an inspection of children's services only, as adult services received an inspection in July 2022. 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 sought to answer the following questions aligned under the principles of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 (The 2014 Act).

1. 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?

How well do professionals ensure children's lived experience and individual needs are understood and included in decision making?

2. 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 do leaders and managers understand the experiences of children and families that need help and protection?

3. Well-being

How well is the local authority ensuring that children are protected and safeguarded from abuse, neglect and any other type of harm?

Do children receive the right help and protection because of the application of appropriate thresholds and effective information-sharing?

4. Partnerships

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?

How well are children supported and protected through effective multi-agency arrangements?

The scope of the inspection included:

- evaluation of the experience of children at the point of performance evaluation inspection
- evaluation of the experience and outcomes people achieve through their contact with services
- evidence of the local authority and partners having learnt lessons from their recent experiences and actions taken/plans for service development and improvement
- consideration of how the local authority manages opportunity and risk in its planning and delivery of social care at individual, operational and strategic levels

1. Summary

- 1.1 MCC leaders and staff are proud of the service they provide to children and families. Leaders have a good understanding of the service strengths and areas for improvement. Service development plans are in place which address national demands and the challenges facing public sector organisations.
- 1.2 Like many local authorities across Wales, MCC experience challenges in relation to the provision and delivery of social care. Most of these are driven by pressures arising from the national pandemic recovery, including an increased demand for service provision and the rising complexity of people's needs. These pressures occurring whilst local authorities are facing significant budgetary pressures. As a bordering authority, MCC report that issues with recruitment, retention, and market sufficiency are impacted by their proximity to English counties.
- 1.3 Recruitment and retention is an ongoing priority for the local authority and a competitive market nationally and regionally presents ongoing challenges with workforce resilience. MCC have an agency reduction plan in place and workforce stability has improved in 2024. Senior leaders, managers and politicians recognise the need to improve workforce resilience within children's services. Staff are proactively appointed through secondment (grow your own) schemes and international recruitment. Additional resource has also been provided for posts which aim to support service development, improve oversight, and quality assurance.
- 1.4 Concerns were identified in relation to the local authority's compliance with statutory requirements for safeguarding children. Specifically in relation to the timeliness of child protection visits and child protection case conferences.

- 1.5 The local authority historically had a high population of Children Looked After (CLA) and service plans have focussed on safely reducing the number of children Looked After by MCC.
- 1.6 Improvements have been made through the development of pre-statutory and preventative services. For example, services are in place to support the rehabilitation of children following periods of being looked after; to provide medium-term holistic support to families who make sustainable change; and therapeutic responses to parents and carers supporting children with trauma. The SPACE wellbeing panel¹ provides good information sharing and a clear pathway to preventative services.
- 1.7 The local authority is working towards the ambitions of the Welsh Government 'eliminate' agenda². Leaders have overseen significant service change and developed a range of posts and teams to meet this aim. The Family Reconnect Team assess the needs of children against the court order and care plan which brought them into care, supporting rehabilitation home or step-down out of placement where appropriate. The Family Resolution Team offers holistic support for families within private and public law proceedings. The new 14+ Service has an improved focus on the pathway planning for CLA, including an exploration of revoking care orders when children can achieve permanence at home. This reduces the risk of children becoming looked after and supports opportunities for permanence within their family.
- 1.8 Alongside these developments, the local authority has completed a restructure of services for children and families who need support and protection, and leaders plan to review the Early Help and Assessment Team (EHAT). The local authority is developing a new practice model (Keeping Children Safe), practice standards, and a quality assurance framework. Sustainable progress is needed to improve compliance with statutory requirements and create consistency in strengths-based approaches. The application of effective quality assurance processes will be essential in this regard.
- 1.9 Nearly all staff report being well supported by their colleagues and managers to do their job. Most staff would recommend working for MCC. This is underpinned by a 'one service and team' ethos with practitioners, managers, and leaders being described as motivated, accessible, and supportive. Given the contextual challenges above, it is a credit to leaders that staff have been supported through these changes and report these strengths.

¹ [S.P.A.C.E. Wellbeing Monmouthshire :: Healthier Together \(cymru.nhs.uk\)](https://www.nhs.uk/healthier-together/cymru)

² [Removing profit from the care of looked after children: briefing January 2023 \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](#)

- 1.10 There is variation in the quality of services and social work practice afforded to children and families. Specific improvements are required with some child protection interventions, to bring practice in line with the Wales Safeguarding Procedures³ (WSP). The local authority should also ensure the consistent application of strengths-based practice and quality assurance.

Key findings and evidence

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

2. People - voice and control

Strengths

- 2.1 People find it easy to contact social services and they are treated with dignity and respect. The majority of people feel listened to and receive useful Information, Advice and Assistance (IAA). Leaders understand the needs of people in their area and provide good strategic direction to meet these needs and service demands.
- 2.2 The Children's Commissioner for Wales describes the MCC Participation Strategy as **positive practice** and '*an excellent example of how services are embedding the principle of participation into their ways of working*⁴. Preventative and statutory services are expected to have their own participation plan, with delivery of outcomes being monitored by senior management. Teams are developing systems for seeking feedback and coproducing services with people. In the best examples, this has resulted in improved resources for people accessing community centres and inclusion for diverse groups (registering care leavers to vote and providing culturally appropriate services for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children).
- 2.3 There is emphasis on children being given the opportunity to have a voice and share their life experience. CLA described having social workers who listen and take their views on board. When they did not have a good relationship with their social worker, this was nearly always due to staff turnover and challenges with recruitment and retention.
- 2.4 Family support and preventative services work closely with social workers, to ensure families benefit from outcome-focused interventions. The views of people are recorded throughout general case recordings. Some chronologies

³ [Safeguarding Wales](#)

⁴ [A Children's Rights Approach for Social Care in Wales - Children's Commissioner for Wales \(childcomwales.org.uk\)](#)

are used to support an understanding of past harm. Parents and carers told us about examples of child-focused relationships between practitioners and families.

- 2.5 Most foster carers describe receiving good quality information when children are placed in their care and timely support at times of crisis. In addition, they receive a positive response to any concerns they escalate to their supervising social worker or the child's Independent Reviewing Officer.
- 2.6 The local authority gives regard to the rights of children to be offered independent professional advocacy. There are good links between the commissioned advocacy provider, leaders, and the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Team (SQAT). There are examples of parents and children benefitting from formal advocacy, with routine age-appropriate referrals being made for children named on the child protection register (CPR).
- 2.7 The Healing Hands project is supporting and upskilling staff with emotional well-being and additional support needs. Managers provide reflective spaces to support workforce resilience and team morale. Senior leaders and managers remain appropriately focused on workforce recruitment and retention. A workforce plan is in place and there are recent indications this is helping to improve workforce stability.

Areas for improvement

- 2.8 There is limited evidence to confirm children have benefitted from direct work which informs ongoing assessment and care planning. Children's direct contributions are important to support decision-making, particularly when this relates to whether they are at risk of experiencing harm. **The local authority should ensure assessments and care plans consistently capture the voice of children.**
- 2.9 The voice of significant adults and their strengths are not sufficiently evidenced within child protection assessments and section 47 enquiries. It is important children's services work towards consistent parental involvement throughout the safeguarding process, subject to this being in the best interests of the child. Informal advocacy would also be improved through specific focus on the role of extended family in promoting and creating safety for children. **The voice and choice of parents and support networks should be strengthened within assessments and plans.**
- 2.10 Leaders are working with staff to develop and pilot new approaches to supervision. The frequency of supervision is inconsistent for some staff and the

quality of supervision can vary. This could be further developed by consistently agreeing SMART⁵ actions and evidencing a reflective and strengths-based approach. Equally, some staff would benefit from an enhanced focus on staff well-being and professional development. **Leaders should ensure consistent standards for supervision and well-being support.**

- 2.11 The support of agency workers is essential in addressing gaps in service areas. This is especially relevant in the commissioning of temporary child protection conference chairs. These posts provide continuity of support to families and challenge where appropriate to practitioners. The approach of agency and local authority conference chairs can vary. **Leaders should work with all staff to create consistent approaches to practice.**
- 2.12 The local authority is predominantly English speaking and wants to achieve an 8.986% increase in the number of Welsh speakers by 2027. MCC report 100% compliance with the active offer of Welsh. Only one member of staff in the Child and Family Service can speak Welsh. **Leaders should continue to develop sufficiency to meet the linguistic needs of Welsh speaking people.**

3. Prevention

Strengths

- 3.1 A preventative approach underpins practice and IAA is understood at many levels of the organisation. The local authority adopts a place-based approach⁶ and the InFACT (Integrated Families and Community Together Team) deliver an 'advice line' service for families, as the first point of contact for early intervention.
- 3.2 EHAT have experienced a significant rise in the number of people seeking IAA. Despite this, practitioners make decisions for all contacts received within one working day and all assessments are within statutory timescales. The local authority report that all care and support plans are completed within ten working days of the (EHAT) single assessment concluding.
- 3.3 There is a coherent approach to early help and prevention to support children and families. This enables families to receive support and provide their children with the safety, nurture and care they need. Services have developed that enhance the support available for children, young people, and their families.

⁵ SMART - SMART is a best practice framework for setting goals. A SMART goal should be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound.

⁶ [Place-based approaches to community engagement and support | GOV.WALES](#)

- 3.4 The CAMHS transformation programme supported the development of a Single Point of Access for Children's Emotional (SPACE) Wellbeing. The service operates in line with national objectives and the Single Front Door principle of the NEST Framework⁷. This **positive practice** supports children, young people, and families to access the right service at the right time.
- 3.5 The range of preventative and therapeutic services available through SPACE Wellbeing is extensive. The availability of trauma/psychologically informed approaches and crisis interventions, being a specific strength. This includes school-based counselling, internal counsellors, play therapists, family therapy, well-being workers, and clinical psychology. More recently, the Family Time Service expanded its service offer, to include out of hours support for families in crisis. In some cases, this includes 24/7 support for families, and we heard good examples of this keeping children safe whilst decisions are made around safeguarding. Monmouthshire Young Carers also provided 1:1 and group support for 236 young carers and 130 family members.

Areas for improvement

- 3.6 A shared understanding about how to respond to presenting need and harm is not clear across partner agencies. There is currently no multi-agency document available to reinforce consistency. This can impact the timeliness and appropriateness of responses, as children's services can be overwhelmed by a high volume of contacts. **Leaders should continue to work with partners to develop a regional approach to threshold and need.**
- 3.7 The rise in demand within EHAT has impacted the resilience of the service. Staff are trained to use collaborative communication with people, which should support coproduction and proportionate decision making. However, service pressures cause inconsistent approaches to assessment and practice. **The local authority should ensure the persistent demands of this work do not undermine the quality of practice provided to people.** This is important as interventions within EHAT can set the tone for assessments and plans within Family Support and Protection Teams (FSPT). Equally, strengths-based practice and proportionate decision making within EHAT, will reduce demand and the need for re-assessment within FSPT.
- 3.8 Strengths should be identified and acknowledged sooner within child protection processes. Leaders have re-shaped services and recently merged court and protection teams, to support preventative approaches at an earlier stage in the

⁷ [Nest Nyth - Gwentph](#)

child's journey through care and support. **Leaders should continue to have oversight and monitor that strengths-based practice is used consistently across the service.**

4. Well-being

Strengths

- 4.1 Overall, safeguarding is understood at many levels of the organisation. The local authority has a local policy for *Keeping Children Safe* within the child protection process. This supports internal staff to have a clear understanding of local guidance and standards. It includes arrangements for managers and leaders to have line of sight on the lived experience of children.
- 4.2 Practitioners are focused on developing supportive and trusting relationships with people. EHAT 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.
- 4.3 Within the Public Law Outline (PLO), leaders provide constructive challenge to support consideration of all options. Social workers consistently create assessment plans which support analysis of the core risks relating to threshold, the impact on the child, and parental capacity to change. This **positive practice** supports robust analysis and proportionate decision making in the latter stages of a child's journey through safeguarding processes.
- 4.4 The local authority are developing placement opportunities for children who are Looked After at a local and regional level, to ensure they are living in safe and appropriate settings. This includes efforts to increase the numbers of in-house carers, and through the expansion of residential and supported accommodation options within the county.
- 4.5 A rapid rehousing transition plan was approved by MCC Cabinet this year. This includes a detailed action plan setting out how the council will address the challenges it faces around homelessness and homeless accommodation. A young person's homelessness panel has been established and will help focus resources where they can have the greatest impact.
- 4.6 Nearly all local authorities in Wales have insufficient foster carers to meet demand. This creates an over-reliance on private providers. To encourage the recruitment and retention of foster carers, the local authority is working at a local and regional level to ensure their on-going offer, both financial and

practical, is as good as it can be. The local authority is working with Foster Wales to run active campaigns and increase the numbers of in-house foster carers to provide placements. Two children's homes have been commissioned last year through partnership models, one of which is a specialised provision for young people with complex needs. More opportunities to develop residential and supported accommodation placements are planned for the future.

Areas for improvement

- 4.7 Compliance with statutory visits to children on the CPR has ranged from 58.8% to 67.2% in the year to date. **The local authority must adhere to statutory standards for visiting children named on the CPR. Leaders should work with operational staff to understand and resolve the contextual reason for any challenges with recording.**
- 4.8 The local authority takes a cautious approach to risk management and evidence of parental change, within child protection. Practice would be improved through the consistent application of strength-based and solution focussed approaches. **Leaders should ensure practitioners consistently work with stakeholders and significant adults to share information about risk and promote proportionate decision making.**
- 4.9 Assessments outside of PLO do not consistently address the risks and outcomes needed to reduce harm and promote well-being. Practitioners can lose focus on the core issues for assessment. The quality of assessments would be improved by having increased focus on risks, strengths, impact, and outcomes. **Leaders should have greater oversight of the quality of assessments, to ensure they are consistently focused on whether a child is suffering significant harm or is at risk of suffering significant harm.**
- 4.10 This equally applies to child protection conference chairs whose primary role is to ensure the conference is child-centred and the care and support protection needs of children are met. Outline plans are mostly comprised of a list of services. As the outline care and support protection plan is developed through core groups, the focus on risk and safety can further diminish, with records focusing broadly on service updates and parental compliance. **Leaders should have greater oversight of the quality of plans, to ensure they are consistently focused on risks, strengths, the impact on children, and outcomes to be achieved.**
- 4.11 SQAT review the care and support plans for CLA, and the care and support protection plans for children on the CPR. This includes two members of staff and corporate support has been provided to commission cover for a vacant

post. This resource currently reviews the plans of 201 CLA and 115 children on the CPR. The service has a very high workload and this impacts on the quality of work reviewing officers can do. The local authority do not currently have sufficient resilience within the SQAT. **Leaders should continue to work towards improved sufficiency, to consistently meet agreed standards.** Despite this, nearly all reviews for CLA are held within statutory timescales and foster carers describe the child's view as being prominent within the review process. **Leaders should continue to develop sufficiency, to move beyond compliance and work towards the ambitions of the IRO Practice Standards⁸.**

- 4.12 Paperwork is not routinely completed and shared with parents and stakeholders prior to conference. Significant family members are not always given an opportunity to attend meetings. Conference chairs do not always speak with parents prior to conference. Delays have occurred with child protection conference for a range of reasons, including delays with paperwork, difficulties with quoracy, and workforce challenges. **Leaders must ensure practice improves and consistently meets the timescales and requirements of the Wales Safeguarding Procedures.**
- 4.13 Managers and leaders receive core data sets that are scrutinised within a data management clinic. Systems for data entry are not currently supporting this process in a sufficiently valid way. For example, many assessments and plans are completed on a Word document outside the social care record IT system, and this leaves inconsistency with approvals and oversight. There are system issues preventing visits being saved to the local authority database. In effect, this means managers cannot be confident whether visits, assessments, and plans are being completed in a timely manner. Leaders have advised that system developments have been delayed, pending decisions being made about the local authority joining the Welsh Community Care Information System. **The local authority should continue to work towards interim arrangements which can assure leaders that statutory and local standards are being met.**
- 4.14 There are insufficient systems in place to provide quality assurance, and managers and SQAT staff do not have capacity to complete this activity in a consistent way. The local authority is developing a new practice model (*Keeping Children Safe*), practice standards, and a quality assurance framework. This improvement will be supported by the creation of three new posts which support service development and quality assurance (an additional service manager, implementation officer, and further conference chair).

⁸ [IRO-Exec-Summary_E.pdf \(afkacymru.org.uk\)](#)

Leaders should ensure these developments take place in a timely way, to drive consistency across teams and improve key practice areas.

5. Partnership and Integration

Strengths

- 5.1 There are good examples of prevention services working in a constructive way with social workers, to support the well-being of families receiving care and support. This includes **positive practice** where social workers can access consultations with a range of professionals, who provide alternative perspectives and support to develop a more holistic view of the child's needs. Information sharing with internal services would be improved further through the consistent recording of these consultations and reflective sessions.
- 5.2 There are good examples of information sharing between agencies, when safeguarding children. This results in appropriate information exchanges within safeguarding enquiries and initial child protection conferences. It is exceptionally **positive practice** that initial strategy discussions and meetings are predominantly multi-agency, which enriches the information sharing process. Historical and relevant contextual information is generally made available at child protection conference. Schools know their pupils well, and it is positive to see the contribution of school staff at important safeguarding meetings.
- 5.3 Overall, partnerships are progressing towards effective integration, meeting needs, and promoting well-being in line with legislation and expectations. Leaders work well with partners across Gwent to develop and innovate, to improve outcomes for children and young people with complex needs. This includes the SPACE Wellbeing Panel, and other notable regional initiatives outlined below.
- 5.4 Action for Children Platform Gwent4YP Support service provides individual and group peer support sessions, with 88% of young people self-reporting improved emotional well-being. The Skills for Living project delivered by Action for Children supports care experienced young people to overcome their experiences and make changes in their lives. The Regional Partnership Board have been working closely with clinical leads, partners and strategic groups to ensure full use of the Neurodevelopmental Improvement Fund. This has been utilised to increase support sessions, assessment capacity, post diagnostic support, and the production of digital materials for individuals and their families.

- 5.5 Providers and third sector agencies report effective information sharing between child and family and their agencies. One agency described this **positive practice** to state that *'Monmouthshire have proven themselves to be considered, reflective and analytical in ensuring that our partnership support services are what is needed in this area. This partnership approach has allowed for a sustained, impactful and much valued service that has been able to evolve according to need and help many children and young people to get much needed permanency in their lives'*.
- 5.6 MACE (Multi-agency Child Exploitation) panel is well regarded by partners and is an effective platform for information sharing about risks in respect of non-familial harm.

Areas for improvement

- 5.7 Inappropriate referrals can be made to children's services by partners. This increases demand and impacts the capacity of the service to respond. **Leaders should work with partners to address this issue and maintain a timely safeguarding response. Children's services should consistently report the outcome of referrals to the person who made the initial report.**
- 5.8 Safeguarding plans are not being used to drive outcomes for people. **Leaders should improve systems for updating and distributing the safeguarding plan to partner agencies.** This will support partners to consistently work towards agreed outcomes.
- 5.9 Communication and shared multi-agency cooperation requires improvement in some key areas. For example, there are challenges arranging child protection medicals and outcome strategy meetings are not generally attended by Police. Children's services have introduced a pre-conference panel that convenes following a section 47 enquiry. The All Wales Safeguarding procedures do not support this single agency arrangement being used in lieu of a multi-agency outcome strategy meeting. Whilst the panel provides additional opportunity for senior managers to support rationale and decision making, there is indication the panel can introduce some delays between the conclusion of a section 47 enquiry and initial child protection conference. **Leaders should work with the Regional Safeguarding Board to specify accepted practice, as outlined in the Wales Safeguarding Procedures. Senior managers across agencies should also ensure there is regular and consistent dialogue to address local (strategic and operational) safeguarding challenges.**

6. 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.

7. Methodology

- 7.1 Most inspection evidence was gathered by reviewing the experiences of people through review and tracking of their social care record. We reviewed 34 social care records and tracked 6 of these to understand the person's experience in more depth.
- 7.2 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 other professionals involved.
- 7.3 To ensure the voice of people is central to our work, CIW completed engagement with 6 CLA and 8 foster carers during the notification period. CIW also interviewed local authority employees and partner organisations from statutory and third sector agencies. All of the above resulted in CIW engaging with 81 individuals.
- 7.4 In addition, we reviewed supporting documentation sent to CIW for the purpose of the inspection, including compliments/complaints and staff supervision records.

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

8. 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 people taking part did not wish to contribute to this inspection in Welsh.

9. Acknowledgements

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

10. Glossary

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.

SMART - SMART is a best practice framework for setting goals. A SMART goal should be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound.

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.

Eliminate agenda - As part of the Co-operation Agreement between the Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru, there is a clear commitment to 'eliminate private profit from the care of children looked after'.