

# Monmouthshire County Council Performance Evaluation Inspection Children's Services

Undertaken Feb 2024

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# Scope and Purpose

- To review the Local Authority's performance in exercising its social services duties and functions in line with legislation
- Principles of the SSWBA:
  - People (Voice & Control)
  - Prevention
  - Wellbeing
  - Partnerships
- Focus on children's experience
- Outcomes of people's contact with the Local Authority
- Plans for service development and improvement
- How the Local Authority manages opportunity and risk in its planning and delivery of social care at individual, operational and strategic levels

# Methodology

- 4 inspectors completed 4 weeks of pre-inspection work and a week of field work
- 34 social care records, 6 of which were tracked in more detail to understand the person's experience in more depth
- Tracking included having conversations with the child / young person, their family or carers, allocated social worker, their line-managed and other professionals involved
- Surveys were issued to workforce, partner organisations and families
- Specific engagement with 6 Children Looked After and 8 foster carers.
- Interviews with Children's Services workforce, partner organisations from statutory and third sector agencies
- 81 individuals altogether
- Review of service documentation including service data and KPIs, service plans, operational procedures, strategic documents, complaints / compliments report etc

# Next Steps

- CIW routine monitoring
- Report shared and discussed with Cabinet
- Shared with the children's services workforce and partners including the Corporate Parenting Panel
- Brought into People Scrutiny Committee
- Inspection action plan in place and being implemented

# Summary – positives

- Recognised significant challenges faced by all LAs e.g. demand, complexity, budgetary pressures, recruitment.
- Mention was made of the work done to achieve safe reduction of CLA and plans in place to respond to eliminate agenda {decrease in the number of CLA of 2.0%, compared to an increase of 0.8% nationally}
- Positive on-going development and improvement of family support services was recognised, and that a preventative approach underpinned the whole service
- Positive team spirit led by motivated, accessible, and supportive managers at all levels with the majority of staff saying they would recommend working for MCC Children's Services

***“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.”***

# Summary – areas for improvement

- Concerns raised over compliance with statutory requirements for safeguarding children specifically the timeliness of child protection visits and child protection case conferences
- Reported a renewed focus on practice but more work to be done to ensure practice is consistent across the service [particularly in the earlier parts of the child protection process] and ensuring that QA is in place.
- Areas for attention:
  - impact of demand at the ‘front-door’
  - aspects of child protection
  - specific elements of practice
  - strengthening quality assurance
  - workforce planning

# Front-door

- Front-door deals with new contacts and when required manages CP inquiries (S47s) and holds a case until the initial child protection conference
- Context of high demand and volume
- Impact on workforce
- Impact on practice, specifically lost opportunities for strengths-based approaches early on and over cautious approach to risk

## Specific actions in progress:

- Strengthening data analytics to understand referral patterns and what this is telling us so that we can engage with referring agencies
- This will also help ensure we have the right level of resource at the front-door
- Re-focus on practice framework 'Keeping Children Safe'
- Development of regional threshold document

# Demand Context

- The number of contacts received (4,452 per 100,000) was higher than the national average (4,223 per 100,000) as of March 2024.
- There was an increase in the number of contacts received of 29.7%, compared to an 11.0% increase nationally, from April 2023 to March 2024 (7071 compared with 5825)
- The number of child protection enquiries received (746 per 100,000) was higher than the national average (289 per 100,000) as of March 2024.
- The number of child protection enquiries received increased in Monmouthshire by 68.8%, compared to an increase of 26.2% nationally.



# Child Protection Stat Visits - Compliance & Quality Assurance

- A stat visit is when a social worker sees child who is on the CPR. They are defined in the regulations and must be completed within specific timescales.
- Stat visits are not the only way in which children on the CPR are '*seen*'
- 67% compliance at the time of the inspection compared with national average 73%

## Specific Actions:

- Understanding, supporting, recording, auditing
- Providing additional individual support and regular training slots around the stat framework
- Resolve recording issues
- Ensuring accurate management information
- Audit programme being implemented

# Child Protection Conferences

- Child Protection Conferences take place when a child is assessed as being at on-going risk of significant harm; a CP plan is developed and implemented through a Core Group with reviews and eventual De-registration managed through the CP conference process.
- Issues were identified regarding timeliness and variability in how the conferences were managed, specifically in respect of parental involvement.
- Some plans were found to be service led rather than outcome focused

## Specific Actions

- Strengthen the role of the Safeguarding Unit in providing increased oversight for children from S47 (child protection inquiry) to Core Group and development of the CP plan
- Scale down the use of external CP chairs and re-emphasise practice expectations for chairs
- Reclarify business processes and expectations around timeliness of conference reports.

# Child Protection Practice

- Following initial conference CP work is undertaken by the Family Support and Protection Team
- Significant positive practice identified particularly within pre-court (CP) work
- Interface with the front door takes some time to re-align
- But numbers have stayed strong (89 at end of year represents slight reduction despite demand at front door) and a very low re-referral rate following de-registration (0.7%)
- Managing complexity and risk is a major challenge and puts significant pressure on the workforce

## Specific Actions:

- Re-focus on practice framework 'Keeping Children Safe' framework
- Look at how we pull forward 'strengths-based interventions' that could make a difference early on in CP process

# Workforce & Leadership Capacity

- Positive recognition workforce planning is given constant strategic attention with some innovative practice and high-quality campaigns
- All Wales Pledge has supported agency exit planning
- Where we focus leadership time and attention makes a real difference (e.g. safe reduction of CLA and placement development)
- We have built-in some additional leadership capacity to help with the current leadership challenges
- Sufficient high-quality workforce makes a real difference in long-term (financial) sustainability and significantly improves outcomes for children
- Plan is to undertake a wider capacity / resource review over this year to re-look at the structure overall and demand around key areas

# Confidence Levels & Key Risks

- Broadly happy with many positives, despite the challenging context
- Confirmed we had a good understanding of our own strengths / areas for improvement – whilst providing additional perspective and opportunity to ensure we are refining and prioritising service plans appropriately
- Many of the issues raised already represented in existing service plans / work in progress
- Positive experience of the process and an open and engaged relationship with our lead inspector

## Key risks

- Connecting Care
- Eliminate
- Budgetary context and range of financial pressures
- Fragility across the service
- Resourcing and competing priorities and challenges

# Summary of key actions so far.....

- Appointed a new SM to work strategically to address some of the challenges at the front-door
- Put in some additional temporary capacity at the front-door
- Launched the threshold document to assist referring agencies
- Appointed of a new SM to take forward placement development
- Re-launched the Keeping Children Safe practice framework with 2 days of mandatory training for all practitioners over the summer
- Put in place additional support and knowledge building for social workers around statutory compliance
- Improved compliance with CP stat visits [up to 79.9% within timescales at Q1]

# Key Achievements Recognised

- Children's meaningful participation in service development and having a voice
- There is a coherent approach to early help and prevention
- Family support and preventative services work closely with social workers, to ensure families benefit from outcome-focused interventions
- Foster carers have good quality information and feel listened to
- 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.
- Managers provide reflective spaces to support workforce resilience and team morale
- Positive practice within the 'public law outline' supports robust analysis and proportionate decision making in the latter stages of a child's journey through safeguarding processes
- Social workers have access to range of multi-disciplinary perspectives
- Leaders understand the needs of people in their area and provide good strategic direction to meet these needs and service demands."
- Most staff would recommend working for Monmouthshire