

CSSIW Inspection Report

Inspection of services for children and families

Flintshire County Council

Focus of inspection

- Access, assessment and care management arrangements.
 - The range of services for children, young people, their families and carers.
 - Workforce management direction and support
 - Quality assurance and performance management arrangements.
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Date of Inspection

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Inspection Team

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1. Introduction

- 1.1. The Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW) was set up in 2007 as an operationally independent division of the Welsh Government. The powers and functions of the Inspectorate are enabled through legislation including the Health and Social Care (Community Health and Standards Act) 2003. Our powers allow us to review local authority social services at a local and national level, to inform the public whether services are up to standard, to promote improvement of services and to help safeguard the interests of vulnerable people who use services and their carers.
- 1.2. We may also work in collaboration with other audit, inspectorate and regulatory bodies in Wales to review areas of mutual interest or concern. The work of the inspectorate in Wales also includes:
- Inspection of social services arrangements provided by councils.
 - Registration of social care services.
 - Inspection of registered social care services.
 - Investigation of possible breaches of the Care Standards Act 2000 and supporting regulations by service providers.
 - Responding to complaints concerning both children's and adult services.
 - Reinforce standards in regulated services and encourage councils and providers to commission, provide and manage better services.
 - Promote joint working with other national regulators.
- 1.3. We aim to ensure the experiences of people who use, or need, local services are at the heart of our work

2. Methodology

- 2.1. CSSIW sought to evaluate the quality of assessment and care management services for children and young people.
- 2.2. Specifically, the Inspection Team wanted to look at council performance in relation to four criteria, both in terms of current performance and possibilities for improvement for the future:
- A. Children, young people, their families and carers are supported by assessment, care management and review practices which comply with national policy, statutory guidance and regulations;
 - B. Children, young people, their families and carers benefit from consideration and use of a range of support services appropriate to their needs;

- C. Children, young people, their families and carers are supported by staff who are properly supervised and receive appropriate management support;
 - D. Improved outcomes for children, young people, their families and carers are supported by effective and consistent, performance management and quality assurance arrangements.
- 2.3. Before visiting the council, the Inspection Team reviewed a range of documentation and performance management information to understand how the council was managing and delivering support for children and young people. Some emerging themes and issues were identified at the start of the inspection and these were tested and examined in further detail when the Inspection Team conducted its onsite work.
- 2.4. Inspectors randomly selected a number of case files for close scrutiny and subsequently interviewed children, young people, their families and carers, together with a range of professional workers who were involved with the assessment and care management process for that particular case.
- 2.5. Inspectors additionally conducted a series of discussions with a range of people which focused upon the council's arrangements for delivering assessment and care management services for children, young people, their families and carers. These included social services managers, central support staff, social workers, duty staff, other council employees, as well as representatives of external voluntary sector agencies and organisations, such as the health service.
- 2.6. Inspectors gathered evidence from all these activities and this was then evaluated to come to conclusions about how well Flintshire County Council was supporting children and young people and to identify any potential areas where it may need to improve.

3. Headline summary

- 3.1. Flintshire County Council is committed to further developing and modernising children's services and now has leadership arrangements in place to deliver upon its potential. There are early signs of a strong focus upon communication and in working closely with the workforce to gain commitment to modernised ways of delivering services. This has been evidenced by initiatives such as 'back to the floor', where senior managers work at front-line locations, workforce conferences and newsletters. Morale is good, and there is a commitment to identifying 'rising stars' within the organisation, with active encouragement for them to shape policy and procedures.
- 3.2. The Head of Children's Services provides strong strategic and operational leadership. Social work staff and their managers feel well supported and this is evidenced through a number of initiatives, such as active caseload weighting, that ensures a considered approach to pressures in demand which are managed within a supportive framework.
- 3.3. Information about the role of the Children's Services is widely available and there is an effective response to those who make contact, with prompt advice and support arrangements. There are good systems in place to ensure work

is appropriately prioritised. Partnership arrangements work well in delivering a co-ordinated approach to meeting need.

- 3.4. There is an increasing focus upon prevention and early intervention that supports the whole family, with better outcomes for children as fewer are needing care.

4. Evaluation: Criteria A

- 4.1. The evaluation tested whether children, young people, their families and carers were supported by assessment, care management and review practices which comply with national policy, statutory guidance and regulations.
- 4.2. Inspectors found evidence of a range of information media that publicised advice and support on the council website and through printed leaflets. Arrangements for receiving enquiries from the public and other professionals are generally sound and there is strong management oversight and support for the work of front-line staff. Referral numbers for assessment are low. Inspectors directly observed the practice of duty and assessment workers and found that appropriate checks were being undertaken and that practice supported procedures. Thresholds for referral are described within a 2005 policy document, although not all workers were found to be applying this consistently.
- 4.3. A total of 30 cases file were selected randomly for analysis by Inspectors, of which 16 were for allocated for detailed scrutiny and case tracking. Of these, most were found to be compliant with national policy, statutory guidance and regulations. For example, all demonstrated that initial decisions were made by a manager within one working day – this mirrored reported performance data by the council.
- 4.4. Staff within the duty and assessment service described themselves as being well supported and Inspectors found evidence that both front-line and senior managers actively monitored and took action to control caseloads and allocation of work. The consequence is that staff morale is good, with corresponding increased stability of the workforce and improving sickness rates.
- 4.5. Inspectors found that referrals for assessments are appropriately prioritised and that response is effectively targeted where risk is highest. Initial assessments were found to be timely and this corresponds to recent council performance data for the second quarter of 2011/12 at 93% which shows improvement on a position that was already significantly above the Wales average of 67%.
- 4.6. The quality of assessment was mainly of a good standard and Inspectors saw some detailed and comprehensive pre-birth risk assessments that were both analytical and outcome-focused. There were examples of sensitive and creative work that effectively involved children, young people and their families in improving the quality of their lives. Thresholds for instigating a core assessment were less well understood and this was evidenced within interviews with staff and managers.

- 4.7. Work needs to be done in ensuring that there is a consistent approach to the application of risk assessment on a general level, as Inspectors found in observation, interview and file analysis that this was not always achieved. The council has significantly invested in equipping staff with knowledge and skills to use in assessing risk, but different tools are being used to determine this with corresponding variances in interpretation.
- 4.8. The Independent Review Officer (IRO) role is central to monitoring the council's performance with regard to looked after or accommodated children. Inspectors found strong commitment to challenging poor performance with robust senior management support in promoting high standards. This was evidenced by issues being identified and addressed at earlier stages than had previously been achieved, as a consequence of the recently revised reporting arrangements where IROs are now directly managed by the Head of Service. Worker attendance at reviews needs to be assured if children and young people are to be consistently well served, and there is senior management commitment to ensuring this standard is met.
- 4.9. The council needs to ensure that the incorporation of the IROs within the new safeguarding unit assures independent reporting arrangements and fulfils statutory requirements for direct management arrangements, specifically with regard to case management and resource control.

4.10. What Flintshire does well to support outcomes

- 4.10.1. There is a wide range of accessible information available to the public.
- 4.10.2. There is a timely response to those who contact the council.
- 4.10.3. Checks with organisations such as the police are carried out promptly.
- 4.10.4. Referrals are prioritised in a considered and appropriate way.
- 4.10.5. Lower priority work that cannot be immediately allocated is managed by senior officers.
- 4.10.6. Initial assessments are timely, and the quality of a number of those examined was good. There were some very detailed pre-birth assessments that were analytical and outcome-focused.
- 4.10.7. Strong commitment to Independent Reviewing Officer role in challenging poor practice with looked after children.

4.11. What Flintshire needs to do to improve outcomes

- 4.11.1. Ensure that thresholds for services are consistently understood by all workers.
- 4.11.2. Ensure a consistent understanding of the requirement to conduct core assessments.
- 4.11.3. Develop a more consistent approach to the application of risk assessment, the tools that are used and how recording is processed.

- 4.11.4. Consistent social worker commitment to ensuring attendance at, and timeliness of, reviews for looked after children.
- 4.11.5. Ensure the new safeguarding structure maintains the integrity of the IRO role.

5. Evaluation: Criteria B

- 5.1. The evaluation tested whether children, young people, their families and carers benefitted from consideration and use of a range of support services appropriate to their needs.
- 5.2. Interviews with a representative sample of partner organisations confirmed good working arrangements to support positive outcomes and there was a strong commitment to working collaboratively. Regional partners identified the council as one of the best to engage with in North Wales, and there was recognition that there was a sustained emphasis upon ensuring that 'the child is the focus'. The council is regarded as an effective communicator and open to change.
- 5.3. The Children and Young People's Partnership is described as 'very active', and the current plan adopts an inclusive approach to 'making a positive difference', recognising that collaboration and partnership working is fundamental in making it happen. There is a commitment to refocusing efforts on prevention and early intervention that will reduce the need for intensive, higher-cost interventions, later on.
- 5.4. Inspectors found evidence on case files, performance data and within interviews that targeted work is having an impact and an example of this was demonstrated in fewer out-of-county placements, better outcomes for children and young people, with corresponding reduced expenditure. The council is committed to developing robust commissioning arrangements for future out-of-county placements.
- 5.5. Advocacy and support services are largely effective, and there are two participation groups; one that brings together children in care and another that represents those leaving care. Both of these groups nominate representatives who participate in the Children's Services Forum – this provides the main focus for service improvements for looked after children and care leavers, and underpins the council's role in corporate parenting.
- 5.6. The 'Pride of Flintshire' Awards' event is a much-valued initiative that celebrates the achievements and success of looked after children and care leavers. Held annually, its purpose is to raise esteem and confidence by rewarding hard work and effort – this is an important element of the corporate parenting role, and universally acknowledged as an excellent example of creativity and enterprise by the council.
- 5.7. Progress has been made in developing the range of accommodation for homeless young people; however the council recognises that more work needs to be done to ensure that this is appropriate in all cases. Supported lodging is the preferred option for most young people, but there are limited options for those with enhanced needs.

5.8. What Flintshire does well to support outcomes

- 5.8.1. Wide ownership of shared agenda to improve services. Effective working relationship with key partner organisations, particularly police and health services.
- 5.8.2. Positive outcomes from out-of-county commissioning work with fewer placements and improved control of expenditure.
- 5.8.3. Focus upon the child, with established advocacy and participation frameworks.
- 5.8.4. 'Pride of Flintshire Awards' is a valued celebration of the achievements of looked after children and care leavers

5.9. What Flintshire needs to do to improve outcomes

- 5.9.1. The availability of appropriate accommodation for homeless young people.

6. **Evaluation: Criteria C**

- 6.1. The evaluation tested whether children, young people, their families and carers were supported by staff that are properly supervised and receive appropriate management support.
- 6.2. Inspectors interviewed a range of staff and managers who reported that morale was good, support was readily available and professional supervision was, in the main, regularly provided. This was corroborated through examination of case files and supervision records, although inconsistency in its application was evident. There was, however, a clear sense of purpose, together with the enthusiasm and commitment to deliver responsive services.
- 6.3. Front-line workers and managers provided positive feedback on the capacity of senior managers to keep in touch with important issues and concerns of social workers. They expressed views of feeling valued. Communication was described as very good and Inspectors saw evidence of this through attendance at workforce meetings and examination of staff newsletters.
- 6.4. The council acknowledges previous issues with turnover of staff and relatively high sickness rates, but there is evidence that both have reduced following concerted management efforts, although high sickness levels remain in some teams. There is reduced dependency on the use of agency staff and this has ensured greater stability within the workforce and consistency of practice, together with associated cost savings. Worker and managers expressed a desire to ensure a great component of experienced staff within the duty and assessment service and there was a clear commitment in working towards this goal.
- 6.5. Inspectors saw evidence of caseload weighting and active senior management support to enable appropriate control of workflows. This ensured that individual capacity was routinely considered when work

allocation was being processed, with higher priority work being assigned accordingly.

6.6. A culture of flexibility has been established in order to ensure that workload pressures in key areas could be shared with others where possible. Inspectors found confirmation of this procedure within case file records.

6.7. Workforce planning is increasingly well developed and is underpinned by staff development and training programmes that generally offer wide opportunities for supporting service modernisation.

6.8. What Flintshire does well to support outcomes

6.8.1. Workforce morale is high and employees feel valued and supported.

6.8.2. Senior managers are 'in touch' with operational front-line issues.

6.8.3. Staff turnover is falling and there is a corresponding reduced use of temporary agency workers.

6.8.4. There is a system of active caseload weighting in place that considers capacity when allocating new work.

6.8.5. Flexible approach to pressures in duty system, whereby other teams can offer worker resources when required.

6.8.6. There is a clear expectation regarding the frequency of professional supervision and management appraisal.

6.8.7. Effective workforce development and appropriate staff training opportunities.

6.9. What Flintshire needs to do to improve outcomes

6.9.1. Ensure appropriate component of experienced workers within duty system.

6.9.2. Train first-line managers in order to ensure a more consistent quality of professional supervision.

6.9.3. Continue to address staff sickness issues in some areas, considering the cause and impact.

7. Evaluation: Criteria D

7.1. The evaluation tested whether improved outcomes for children, young people, their families and carers were supported by effective and consistent, performance management and quality assurance arrangements.

7.2. The council has a clear vision for service development that is well communicated and widely understood. Plans are increasingly outcome focused and encourage an enabling relationship with a range of partners. There is closer scrutiny of capacity to meet changes and address risk.

- 7.3. The new Director is ambitious to secure strong quality assurance measures and there are increasingly robust governance and reporting arrangements. Inspectors saw evidence of regular use a range of performance management tools and reporting mechanisms that tracked progress against targets.
- 7.4. Elected members are actively involved, well informed, responsive and supportive of new developments, such as the 'reform to transform' programme. Senior managers are persuasive and credible in enabling a shared vision of local priorities and improved outcomes.
- 7.5. The council is keen to test compliance of practice with policies and procedures and uses a case file audit programme to provide assurance. This supplements professional supervision arrangements, and is used by senior managers to additionally assess standards of recording and decision making. Inspectors, however, found examples of first-line management authorisation of assessment documentation that was recorded prior to completion – the council has offered assurance that this will be urgently addressed.
- 7.6. Increased resources for child protection have led to the creation of two safeguarding manager roles, and this is enabling the council to more effectively support increasing numbers on the child protection register. Previous issues with delays in distributing minutes of case conferences are now being tackled, although a recent audit revealed the longest to be 56 working days – this need to be closely monitored in order to attain an acceptable level of performance.
- 7.7. Advocacy is actively promoted and complaints are well managed. There is a resolution ethos that is used to assist in learning lessons from complaints. Reports are presented on a quarterly basis to senior managers and an annual report is submitted to elected members.
- 7.8. Inspectors found that there was inconsistent use of the PARIS information system. Interviews, observation and direct record scrutiny revealed this to be on a number of levels, such as timeliness of data input in some teams, to quality of recording in others. Not all staff felt confident in use of the information system and some were unfamiliar with a number of components.
- 7.9. Timeliness of recording key and core data within the PARIS system is necessary in order to ensure that all parties who access it will, at all times, be able to retrieve current and potentially significant information. Inspectors found that this was not always the case, with mismatches between electronic and paper files – the latter sometimes having the most up-to-date material, despite a clear commitment to moving to a paperless environment. Some of the reasons behind this were cited as workload pressures, but it was evident to Inspectors that this was only partly the case, as some workers were able to demonstrate full commitment to the paperless policy in a timely manner.
- 7.10. What Flintshire does well to support outcomes
- 7.10.1. Clear, shared vision for service development that is understood by all.
- 7.10.2. Strong leadership with increasing focus upon quality assurance.

7.10.3. Sets ambitious targets, with clear governance and accountability for performance.

7.10.4. Positive engagement of elected members evidenced in strong commitment to 'reform to transform' programme.

7.10.5. Use of audits to test compliance of practice with policies and procedures.

7.10.6. Strengthened safeguarding arrangements, demonstrated through increased child protection resources.

7.10.7. Pro-active approach to complaints that promotes a lessons-learned philosophy.

7.11. What Flintshire needs to do to improve outcomes

7.11.1. Ensuring that assessment documentation is only authorised by managers when in a completed state.

7.11.2. Continue to improve the timeliness of case conference minutes and their subsequent distribution.

7.11.3. Ensure a consistent level of competent use of computer systems by all staff.

7.11.4. Ensure that data is promptly and consistently recorded within the computer system.