

Council of the Isles of Scilly

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 14 October 2019 to 18 October 2019

Lead inspector: Joy Howick
Her Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Services for children and families on the Isles of Scilly have improved since the single inspection in 2016, when they were judged to be good. Leaders have made further positive changes. Services are now stronger, with particularly noticeable improvements in early help and preventative services. These services are well embedded, reducing the need for statutory support and leading to consistently positive outcomes for children and families.

Partner agencies and the council place children firmly at the forefront of strategic planning and service delivery. Senior and political leaders form a highly effective, skilful and flexible core team. They use a 'co-production' approach, working collaboratively with families and partners to build increasingly effective local services for children. This is critical in the context of a small island community. The well-embedded single model of practice has enabled leaders to establish a highly responsive partnership between universal and specialist services. As a result, children receive flexible, imaginative help and support in good time, whatever the level of their need.

The self-assessment undertaken by the local authority accurately details what is working well, and it is equally clear about what is still an area of development. For example, the need to improve the sufficiency of local foster placements. Senior leaders actively look for best practice and they seek out, and act on, scrutiny and feedback. They successfully use this learning, and their detailed knowledge of the community, to continually develop services to meet the needs of local children.

Excellent direct work by the children's workforce helps children and parents to understand their situation, and it improves their well-being. Children's views are carefully considered and central to plans.

What needs to improve

- Greater clarity among education colleagues about what is a contact and what is informal advice.
- The recording of decisions that are made in strategy meetings, to more clearly demonstrate rationale for decisions and consideration of the significant harm threshold.
- The quality of assessments and other case records to ensure that they are consistently up to date and easily understood by children and families.
- The sufficiency of on-island foster placements and the clarity of quality practice standards for emergency placements.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: good

1. An increasing number of children and families receive exceptionally skilled and flexible early help services from an ever-widening range of multi-agency early help professionals. The quality and quantity of early help assessments have continued to improve. All relevant professionals now attend and contribute to early help meetings and plans, ensuring the best possible support for the family. Professionals develop easy-to-follow plans in genuine partnership with families, using the motto 'no decision about me, without me'. Early help professionals provide practical help and support that consistently improve children's circumstances.
2. The 'front door' provides accurate and timely social work advice. Partners place a high value on this and have a shared understanding of thresholds. However, the difference between social workers' 'advice and guidance' and contacts is not always clear. Senior managers have correctly identified that there is more work to do across the partnership to avoid the blurring of boundaries or later confusion about the facts.
3. Social workers make timely, well-informed decisions about the help children and families need. Social workers ensure that parents have agreed to a referral being made to children's social care. In situations of potential harm to a child, and where appropriate, social workers dispense with parental consent. Proportionate checks with other agencies and historical information are undertaken and intelligently analysed, to ensure an appropriate and effective response. Social workers respond quickly to concerns and see children within a timescale that is proportionate to children's needs or presenting risks.
4. A highly responsive emergency duty service is in place, and support from other agencies is well synchronised. In the Isles of Scilly context, emergencies

can rarely be managed by one agency. A genuinely joined-up approach is in place and emergencies are planned for and responded to swiftly and meticulously. Social workers now have access outside office hours to all children's records, and this means that they are now fully aware of all potential risks or issues. At the time of the previous inspection, this was not possible.

5. Few children go missing or are at risk of criminal and sexual exploitation. However, a skilled children's services practitioner works purposefully with partners to publicise the risks that children might face in the Isles of Scilly location. The whole council workforce and relevant businesses are routinely briefed about what to be alert to, and aware of, in order to keep children safe; this approach is well established. For example, taxi firms have demonstrated appropriate curiosity, immediately reporting concerns about children they have transported. A well-designed survey for school children on their knowledge about exploitation has been carefully analysed. The police are now tailoring future school assembly presentations, matched to the findings of this survey.
6. Very small numbers of children are involved in statutory child protection processes. Social workers are well prepared, and they respond effectively to children who are at risk of significant harm. Overall, strategy meetings result in safe decisions and effective plans to protect children. However, the records of these meetings are of variable quality. For example, they do not always include the rationale for the decisions that have been made. Senior managers are taking appropriate steps to improve this.
7. Social workers see children very regularly and form close and meaningful bonds that are important to children. They go the extra mile to see children, sometimes despite limited boat transport and the impact of adverse weather conditions. They undertake sensitive purposeful direct work with children; this enables social workers to understand children's feelings and wishes and the reality of their day-to-day lives. Social workers make persistent and determined efforts to engage with children who struggle to talk about their experiences. Children's wishes and past experiences are understood and used to inform plans, but they are not always easily identifiable in assessments. Chronologies are accurate and up to date. Although the quality of assessments varies, most are of an acceptable standard and helpfully include relevant research. However, not all assessments have been updated, and a small minority are too long, lack analysis and are not comprehensible for parents or children. Children are unlikely to be able to easily read their case records due to the way they are constructed. Children and families receive helpful support during their assessment, and this is making a positive difference to children's lives.
8. Children's plans, which are derived from regular reviews, are up to date and well written. The actions are clear for families and children to understand.

Social workers are ambitious for children and work hard to support them within their family environment. They work closely with partner agencies to consider and support parents' and children's needs. Consequently, children's situations consistently improve. Social workers' records of visits have improved very recently and are now written so that the child will be able to read these records and understand why the social worker was involved in their life and what help they provided.

9. Concerns about adults who work with children are well considered and are responded to appropriately.
10. Social workers' support for disabled children is skilled and thoughtful. Senior managers are attuned to the potential burden of statutory processes for families, and they work hard to align and reduce the number of meetings. Work with brothers and sisters ensures that their needs are not forgotten, but are met through a range of well-organised and personalised opportunities.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: good

11. When children experience increased risks, professionals respond promptly and decisively to ensure that they are protected, ideally within their own family. Decisions about whether, and when, children should be looked after are well considered and proportionate.
12. Since the last inspection, senior leaders have taken some steps to secure a small local fostering resource and to develop plans to make available placements for children to come into care in an emergency. However, the sufficiency strategy does not outline in enough detail how these plans will work in practice or what the parameters are in terms of good practice. Neither does it give details on the legal framework that underpins this work. The Isles of Scilly do not yet have the capacity to care for a larger group of children.
13. Decisions about where children who need local authority care should live are very carefully considered. The best interests of children are firmly at the forefront of social work decision-making.
14. Children benefit from enduring and stable relationships with their social worker. They are seen regularly and are well supported, through direct work, to understand what is happening now and the plans for their future. However, the style and way that children's electronic case records are constructed means that finding documents and identifying the most up-to-date records can be difficult for practitioners, managers and auditors.
15. Planning for children's futures is underpinned by comprehensive and risk-based assessments. Parents are well supported to make the changes they

need to so that, when it is safe, children can return home. When children are unable to return home, careful consideration is given to them remaining within their wider family. Children's rights advocates, discharging the function of independent reviewing officers, lead independent and thorough reviews of children's plans.

16. Social workers are effective advocates for children in care and ensure that they are well supported, encouraging them to enjoy going to school and to reach their full potential.
17. Arrangements for health assessments and any ongoing appointments that are needed ensure that children are seen on the islands and in a way that is least disruptive to their daily life.
18. The local authority has sufficient knowledge of children placed there by other local authorities to meet their responsibilities as a 'host' authority.
19. There are no care leavers on the Isles of Scilly. This does not stop political and senior leaders from carefully considering their roles and responsibilities if a care leaver were to arrive or a child were to leave care. There is a concise and clear policy that sets out effectively the welcome and local offer that care leavers would receive.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: outstanding

20. Leaders place a high value on all children and take their roles as corporate parents seriously. The council describes children's services as the 'jewel in the council's crown'. It has unrelentingly improved the range of already good services available. The close collaborative links between health, police, education, voluntary sector and the local authority partners across Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, as part of the 'One Vision Partnership' enables the Isles of Scilly to deliver high-quality, integrated statutory services across the broadest spectrum of need for children and their families.
21. Senior leaders have an accurate and comprehensive understanding of the islands' community, the quality of local services and the effectiveness of practice that is provided to support children and their families. The local authority has made a significant investment by creating a post to support and coordinate a new integrated single front door for all services for children at all levels of need. This is known as 'Family Scilly'. The post-holder oversees the children's universal workforce and their development towards becoming what is described on the islands as 'expert generalists'. Senior leaders provide a strong and versatile community-wide response to support families. Such an approach helps families to meet children's and parents' emotional and mental health needs, address substance misuse and reduce domestic abuse and

family discord. Managers ensure that when children need to be safeguarded, timely decisions and skilful actions are taken in children's best interests.

22. Senior leaders use their in-depth knowledge of this isolated local authority, with its unique set of advantages and challenges, to inform strategic planning, corporate priorities, operational plans and frontline practice. The senior leadership team recognises the importance of scenario and forward planning and carefully identifies emerging needs and vulnerabilities. The team has taken account of all of these factors, providing dynamic and sensitive services to prevent minor problems from escalating. For some families, this is even before they meet the traditional early help threshold. For example, it has invested in enhanced preventative services, such as a universal child care offer for all two-year-olds and a lively and responsive youth service.
23. Partnership arrangements are mature, trusting and appropriately challenging. The director of children's services (DCS) and the lead member inspire and lead partner agencies to work creatively together. Partners have confidence in managers at all levels, with strategic challenge and joint working consistently translated to the operational frontline. This has brought about improvements in the delivery of service for all vulnerable children. For example, partners have worked well together to develop a high-quality, non-stigmatising support offer to victims of domestic abuse. The recent transfer of the health visitor and school nurse to the local authority has improved further the alignment of this support, leading to a helpful reduction in the number of professionals each family is in touch with.
24. Partner agencies respect the senior leadership team because it provides clarity about what is best for children. Senior leaders have introduced a practice model that provides a shared language to use across the partnership workforce. Children and families have benefited from this unified approach, which is also well embedded in the community, resulting in improved experiences and outcomes. When there are unique situations, services are responsive to families' needs. Professionals work quickly to adapt so that families do not wait for services. The well-trained children's workforce seamlessly responds to complex situations with the minimum of disruption.
25. As new needs or risks have arisen on the Isles of Scilly, all agencies have been quick to identify dangers and respond swiftly to protect children. The use of 'scenario' training that is derived from best practice developed elsewhere has been helpful in supporting this aspect of the local authority's work. For example, the community is alert to child sexual exploitation and wider child exploitation issues, and has responded effectively when these risks have presented on the islands.
26. The senior leadership team and the lead member are an ambitious, reflective, and analytical team with an accurate self-assessment of its services. The areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection are largely

resolved. There is a good understanding of the potential risks from a lack of sufficiency of placement options, possible reductions in budgets, workforce resilience and increasing demand. There are appropriate plans in place to address all these challenges. For example, workforce resilience is carefully thought out, with a well-articulated contingency plan in place with partners in Cornwall.

27. The DCS and the senior leadership team have advocated effectively with health services to address delays and gaps in services for children and young people in respect of their emotional well-being. The Isles of Scilly has 'Bloom', a bespoke, multi-agency network of services, providing helpful wrap-around support to children with emotional needs. This has significantly reduced the number of children who need a specialist CAMHS service. Senior leaders are forceful about ensuring that children get the right support promptly and that professionals travel to see children, rather than children having to leave their home and school to see professionals on the mainland.
28. Performance management and monitoring, alongside the scrutiny work of the 'Our Safeguarding for Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly' board, are diligently and purposefully used by the council to understand practice and the difference this is making to children's lives. The in-depth knowledge of the DCS, through her oversight of the support provided to all children, adds significant value to strategic planning of, and decision-making about, how children and their families are best supported.
29. Performance management information is comprehensive and is supplemented with a range of quality assurance activities and one-off learning events to ensure continual improvement. Senior leaders intelligently adapt different models and ways of working. They have made good use of the local authority's connection with its partners in Cornwall, for example in the methodology of developing the single point of access family hub model, Family Scilly. Learning from a recent peer review from a mainland local authority has been carefully applied to enhance the effectiveness of support for local families. Senior leaders have modified the participation model from another local authority. By using this approach, they have enabled parents to design the local service delivery offer for disabled children.
30. Senior managers balance seeking the scrutiny and feedback of other local authorities and the joint safeguarding board well with close internal analysis of practice. The local authority is a learning organisation with an effective quality assurance framework and meticulous audit activity. Where audits identify deficits in social work practice, action is taken by the social worker to correct this for individual children. Working with its partner services, the senior leadership team has established a highly responsive approach to making service improvements. This is closely aligned with the extensive range of quality assurance activities. Learning from this activity led to the

recruitment of the Thrive early support worker, as well as the Harbour unit, supporting vulnerable children to remain in their school.

31. Because of the small size of the community and her commitment to consultation and partnership, the DCS engages with, and is seen continuously by, children, staff and islanders. The DCS regularly meets with social workers, and every three months she comprehensively reviews what differences services have made to the life of each child who is receiving support from children's services. Social workers say that this approach is supportive and collaborative. Supervision and management oversight are analytical, ensuring good oversight of children's plans. Senior managers ensure that all children receive the right specialist help, without delay, despite the challenges of accessing services on a remote island location.
32. All learning actions arising from audit, inspection, service user feedback and complaints are collated in a single service action plan that is regularly reviewed at the children's trust board. Senior leaders pursue these actions assertively with a clear record of how they have responded to identified areas of development. Leaders benchmark performance against some of the highest performing local authorities.
33. The workforce development strategy aims to raise the skill base of all of the council workforce and children's services professionals, so that most issues that affect children and families can be dealt with on the islands. Senior managers ensure that training for staff and the wider partnership focuses on developing the skills and tools to deal with actual and likely local need. For example, with parental conflict, substance misuse and emotional well-being.
34. Staff morale is high. This is an environment in which social work practice flourishes. Social workers have busy but manageable caseloads. They have access to a wide range of learning opportunities and, through 'scenario training', keep up to date with issues which may present in the future. The electronic case work system is a barrier to easy access to children's records and it is not a useful tool to easily facilitate the external scrutiny of the quality of practice. Senior leaders are aware of this and are weighing up carefully the options for improving or changing this system.



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