

Inspection of Isles of Scilly local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 11 to 13 July 2023

Lead inspector: Tracey Ledder, His Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Inadequate
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Inadequate
The experiences and progress of children in care	Requires Improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Inadequate

Services in the Isles of Scilly for children who need help and protection are inadequate. The council of the Isles of Scilly has not acted quickly enough to address shortfalls identified at the previous judgement inspection in 2019. A focused visit in 2022 that considered the quality of work with children in need of help or protection found that the quality of practice had deteriorated. This pattern of deterioration has continued, and there are widespread and serious shortfalls in practice.

Children on the Isles of Scilly are not receiving effective support, protection and care. When there are safeguarding concerns for children, action is not always taken quickly enough to assess risk or to ensure that children are safe.

Appropriate professional standards for information-sharing and confidentiality are not always understood or applied. This means that information is not shared between agencies or recorded in children's records when it should be. On other occasions, information is discussed without there being appropriate grounds for doing so. These shortfalls limit not only how well social workers are able to assess children's needs and risks, but also the confidence of children, parents and professionals to share personal information.

Leaders recognise that they need help to improve practice and, as such, they have started to benefit from peer support from another local authority. These actions do not, however, address all areas of weaker practice and are either at an early stage or yet to be implemented. This means that their impact is limited.

What needs to improve?

- The effectiveness with which information shared with the local authority about children in need, or children in need of protection, is recorded, assessed and responded to.
- The quality of social work practice to assess, support and protect children.
- The quality of strategy discussions and subsequent child protection enquiries.
- The effectiveness of multi-agency working, including child protection strategy discussions, in identifying risk and providing support and protection to children.
- Management and leadership oversight of the service at both a practice and a strategic level.
- The oversight of corporate parenting arrangements.
- The accuracy of children's records, including how well they capture children's wishes and feelings and record their histories in up-to-date chronologies, to allow full consideration of the child's journey.
- How consistently and effectively the services that children receive meet statutory requirements.

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

1. Children and families rarely get the right help or protection when they need it. The extent of risk and need is not often well understood by professionals. There is widespread confusion about professional roles and responsibilities, the levels of help available and how to access that help in the local authority.
2. The systems in place to review and progress contacts and referrals about children are not effective. When there are concerns or worries about children, they are not always recorded or followed through. This significantly limits the understanding of children's current situations and lived experiences. The often poor quality of information captured prevents sufficient analysis to inform risk assessments and decisions about next steps. Essential information about children is often missing from records. Sometimes this is because staff choose not to record essential information as they are fearful of breaches of confidentiality. In some circumstances, children's needs are overlooked due to over-identification with parents. Likewise, children's histories, including, in some cases, significant involvement with children's social care, are either absent or not clearly detailed. Some requests for children's services' support are closed without evidence of conversations with referrers or families.
3. The quality of early help assessments is mostly weak. Most assessments do not provide a clear picture of the child and family or detail how support will address the difficulties they are experiencing. Most assessments do not contain a chronology of the history of involvement. Without their histories, there is not enough understanding of children's experiences and, therefore, their needs. In

a minority of children's cases, assessments are stronger. These assessments are more comprehensive and show a detailed understanding of the family circumstances and history, and include the child's needs, wishes and feelings, with a clear plan of support.

4. There have been recent changes to the delivery of early help, but these are still in their infancy. The number of lead professionals who are not children's social care staff is currently extremely limited. Not all partner agencies understand the structure of early help services. Partner agencies are unclear about who they can contact if they need to discuss a concern or a worry. Some report a significant deterioration in communication with children's social care. This has resulted in a lack of collaborative working. Some partner agencies inappropriately hold on to information about children's needs and risks and are unsure how to share this. While there are systems in place for some of the wider community risks to be discussed, not all key partners are involved.
5. Not enough has been done to improve the quality of child protection strategy discussions since the previous inspection. Given the islands' small population, strategy discussions do not happen very often, but when they do, the records do not fully demonstrate that the local authority and partners are considering all factors for children who may be at risk. Not producing a chronology of historical information means that action plans are not agreed or implemented, or are not sufficiently robust. In addition, there are occasions when child protection processes are not considered, when the level of risk to children means that they should be. Therefore, the local authority cannot always be confident that children are protected as well as they could or should be.
6. Subsequent child protection investigations are typically superficial. They do not sufficiently address the risks and needs of the children. For example, in one child's case, the social work assessment was overly focused on parents and not enough was done to ascertain the safety of the children or to understand their wishes and feelings.
7. The quality of social work assessments is generally weak. Similar issues found in other areas of practice, with a lack of information to provide an understanding of the child's journey, are also found in these assessments. In addition, there is a lack of contingency planning for children should they need to be cared for in an emergency. This is particularly important given the demographics of the islands.
8. The arrangements to support and protect children outside office hours are not robust. Information gathered by social workers is not consistently recorded and appropriate action is not always taken. This not only prevents workers from obtaining a clear understanding of potential risk, but also prevents the local authority from holding accurate information about the child's history should new information come to light.

9. Insufficient work has been done to understand risks to children and young people in relation to exploitation. There are now procedures in place for vulnerable adolescents who are at risk of exploitation. However, staff have had limited training and experience in this area. There have not been any referrals or concerns of this nature reported, but there are risks in the community that have not been fully shared and addressed with partner agencies.
10. Another local authority undertakes the role of the local authority designated officer (LADO). The LADO describes effective communication with senior leaders. However, the Isles of Scilly do not always make effective use of the LADO service. When there are concerns about adults in a position of trust, they are not always referred to the LADO. As a result, risks to children and the wider community are not always considered. There has been insufficient awareness-raising to help people recognise potential risks to children in the community from adults in positions of trust.
11. There are no records of any children presenting as homeless. If a child were to present as homeless, children's social care and housing staff are aware of the need to jointly assess. However, children's social care's ability to respond swiftly to meet the child's needs may be compromised. This is due to a lack of resources and an assessment framework that is not fully fit for purpose. This is further compounded by the lack of suitable accommodation. The joint working protocol does not fully reflect all the current statutory guidance or the rights and entitlements that must be available for children.
12. For children who are missing education, access to alternative provision is limited. Leaders have allowed the virtual school to lapse. There is no virtual school headteacher to act as an ambitious strategic advocate for children and young people, including through the extended strategic duties to children in need. To access specialist provision, face-to-face alternative provision or post-16 education children must live away from home on the mainland. This adds the potential for social, emotional and mental health challenges and additional safeguarding risks for some children. There is a lack of strategic vision for the development of a wider range of educational provision on the islands to ensure that there is capacity to meet the needs of all children and young people.
13. When leaders clearly identify that a child is electively home educated (EHE), they carry out and commission appropriate checks on their welfare. However, leaders do not use the information they hold to proactively identify all children who are EHE. As a result, the opportunities to identify and tackle risks to children are likely to be missed, as welfare checks are not carried out.

The experiences and progress of children in care: requires improvement to be good

14. There are no children who are looked after in the Isles of Scilly; however, should a child need to be cared for, clear guidance is in place. This guidance is yet to be tailored to reflect the uniqueness of the islands.

15. The local authority is not meeting its statutory requirement to ensure a headteacher for the virtual school is in post. As there are no children looked after, there is consequently very limited current impact.
16. Action to ensure there are enough foster carers on the Isles of Scilly has been slow. However, a more recent recruitment drive has seen progress in this area. This means that there are now enough foster carers to make sure children have placements on the Isles of Scilly should the need arise.
17. The Isles of Scilly commission the work of the recruitment, assessment, training and support for foster carers and potential adopters from another local authority. Assessment, training and support of foster carers mostly meet the needs of both children and foster carers. However, mechanisms are not in place to address actions arising from foster carer review that have not been followed up by the commissioned authority. Managers have not recognised these concerns due to their lack of oversight of the work undertaken on behalf of the Isles of Scilly.
18. There have been no adopters assessed or children adopted on the Isles of Scilly. Should this be required, there are appropriate systems and procedures in place through another local authority adoption service.
19. Regular meetings take place between the Isles of Scilly and the commissioned local authority. Despite this, there is little evidence available to understand how leaders ensure that the quality of this service is what they need it to be. Likewise, the strategic direction and vision to promote adoption on the Isles of Scilly is lacking.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: requires improvement to be good

20. There are no care-experienced young people who have received or are receiving care-leaving services from the Isles of Scilly. However, appropriate systems are not in place to ensure that the local authority meets its statutory obligations and ensure that any potential care leaver will receive the advice, support and services to which they are entitled.
21. The local authority is unable to satisfy itself that it fully understands children's histories to enable it to know if it has any children or young people who may be entitled to leaving care support. Poor recording in children's case records further compounds this difficulty.
22. The local authority acknowledges that the care leaver offer is out of date and needs attention. The local offer is not ambitious enough and more work is required in this area. The local authority is hoping to learn from others and obtain the views of other young people living in similar island contexts.

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

23. Leaders have not ensured that staff across all levels have the experience, skill and training they need to undertake their roles successfully. Ensuring there are staff in place or services contracted to achieve this is an ongoing challenge. Leaders have taken steps to strengthen their commissioning arrangements with one local authority to provide some services and consultancy and are working with another to strengthen strategic oversight. However, the weaknesses identified during this inspection highlight that the local authority does not at present have the balance right between local knowledge and leadership and external expertise and critical support.
24. Leaders and managers do not have sufficient oversight of the quality of practice at both an operational and a strategic level. Leaders do not make effective use of findings from audits and other management information available to them to improve practice.
25. Leaders do not provide the quality assurance and scrutiny panel with an accurate reflection of practice. Therefore, the panel does not have full details and the information it requires to have a robust and sound oversight of social work practice. This is preventing the members of the panel from understanding the landscape of social work practice, and so is limiting their capacity to challenge and to help to support practice improvements.
26. The Isles of Scilly do not have a strong voice in discussions held at the 'Our Safeguarding Children's Partnership Board' for Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. For example, there is not a standing agenda item for the Isles of Scilly and their children at these meetings. Therefore, safeguarding practice issues do not get sufficient attention and discussion to support leaders in raising the profile and improving services for children and families.
27. While the community safety partnership does not have a strategic lead, work undertaken by the chair is currently bridging the gap to ensure that meetings continue and that work is being undertaken to understand key issues about community safety. For example, a domestic abuse protocol is ready to present to full council at its next meeting. While attendance by other agencies is strong, not all partners fully understand their statutory responsibilities and execute them.
28. The lead member for children is a positive and involved advocate for the children of the Isles of Scilly. They understand the challenges that the council faces and have a determination to support the council to improve its understanding of children's needs. There is much more to do to ensure that statutory and corporate parenting responsibilities fully meet the needs of children and families.

29. The views of children and families are sought informally. This has enabled a Pride celebration that has now taken place for two years running. However, there are no regular or formal avenues for children's views to be represented in the council. Therefore, currently, their say does not fully contribute to decision-making processes and the shaping of services.
30. While staff receive regular supervision, this is often poor in quality. An agreement with another local authority to provide staff with additional reflective supervision, advice and consultation is not used to its full potential. As a result, there is a lack of reflection and objective challenge when considering children's needs and risks.
31. The arrangements to investigate complaints or whistle-blowing are not robust and lack sufficient independent oversight and scrutiny. There are times when confidentiality is breached or information is shared inappropriately. For example, discussions take place about children and their families without parental consent and outside of any formal process or arrangements. This compounds already low levels of trust within the community and can prevent individuals asking for help or accessing services.
32. With the aim of providing a framework for staff that supports clearer, more intuitive and secure recording, the local authority has agreed to fund a new electronic case recording system for children's services. This is not yet in place but is planned for implementation in 2024. Leaders have also invested in a set of up-to-date procedures to better guide decision-making and practice. Although a positive step, these are still in draft form and the impact on practice is consequently very limited at this stage.

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