

13 March 2025

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Dear Anne

Monitoring visit to Isles of Scilly children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Isles of Scilly children's services on 11 and 12 February 2025. This was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in July 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Sarah Canto and Anna Gravelle.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- 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 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.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. This visit was carried out on day one partly by remote means due to transport routes being disrupted. Inspectors used video calls for

discussions with local authority staff, managers and leaders. Inspectors were primarily on site for the two days of the visit.

Headline findings

Children and families who live on the Isles of Scilly now benefit from improved services to meet their needs. Substantial developments have been made by the interim senior leadership team to address the significant concerns found at the previous two monitoring visits and inspection. Shortly after the last monitoring visit, in May 2024, an experienced, determined and skilled interim director of children's services (DCS) was appointed who, in turn, appointed an interim management and staff team. The DCS identified urgent and longer-term priorities without delay, to ensure that children receive the help and protection they need to avoid further detriment to them.

At this monitoring visit, no children were found to be at risk of unassessed harm. While important progress has been made, there is still much more to achieve for children to receive a consistently solid service and for structures to be developed for long-term sustainability. Senior leaders do not underestimate the task ahead. Children's services have the solid backing of the full council and corporate partners, who are under no illusion about the gravity of children's services' position. Their commitment, significant financial investment and governance have played a vital role in ensuring that the local authority retains their children's services and develops a pathway for long-term resilience.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Working relationships with key partners are now more effective and collaborative. The local authority and their partners have a greater understanding of one another's roles and responsibilities, enabling effective challenge and support to better meet the needs of children and their families. The local authority now presents as an equal partner in the safeguarding partnership, supporting multi-agency working and training to share and achieve good practice. Senior leaders have developed relationships with strategic partners to enable progress through the improvement board and the implementation of a clear plan of strategic and operational priorities at every level.

The leaders, managers and staff team are mostly interim, and a proposed permanent structure is being reviewed by the council. Leaders are clear that it is crucial that future planning ensures that senior leaders and staff have the level of skill and experience required to implement much-needed improvement. This leadership work includes navigating the wider cultural complexities of social work practice in the Isles of Scilly to enable improvements to continue on this upward trajectory.

Part of the local authority's wide-ranging improvement plan has included a substantial review of services and structure. In part, this has identified failings in

how services have been commissioned previously and a lack of clarity of the impact of these services for children and families. The DCS, in conversation with the safeguarding partnership, is making careful plans to arrange for an independent review of the community's needs to understand and examine the very complex issues of culture, confidentiality and public trust. This is an important stage of planning the delivery of future services to address underlying issues so that services are approachable and accessible for all families who need support at any level in this close-knit community.

A new and evolving quality assurance framework, previously absent, is now being implemented, alongside improving systems and newly created practice standards. All children who received a service in the last year have been reviewed to ensure that no child was overlooked and to identify any child at risk of harm. For those children who who suffered harm or were at potential risk of harm, necessary steps have now been taken by the new leadership team to address these concerns. Following this urgent work, a sufficient and comprehensive child-focused review of practice has taken place so that the leadership team has an informed line of sight into practice. Internal as well as external auditing has been completed to provide objective appraisal of the quality of practice, given the size of the local authority. In the auditing process, the views of children, families and staff have not been specifically sought. This is planned for the next phase of the practice audits to assist in raising the quality of practice further and increasing consistency of approach.

The prompt introduction of a new electronic recording system, involving transferring records from the previous inadequate system, has caused some challenges in accurately recording information, such as chronologies. This has meant that some children's records have gaps as the team familiarises themselves with new standards as well as using the system. Once resolved, better collective oversight and analysis of performance data should increase, negating the need for manual calculations. Practice standards and procedures are being continually adapted during this early stage of improvement, to provide greater clarity for practitioners in providing the best help for families.

Overall, assessment of children's needs is comprehensive and thoroughly identifies the needs of children, while considering whether safeguarding needs exist. Children's voices are captured well but some children could benefit from advocacy. This resource is not currently available. There is clear management oversight and rationale of assessment recommendations.

Levels of need are clearly understood so that children and families receive the help they need. Positively, plans include contingencies, for example, identifying which extended family members could care for children in an emergency. Family group conferencing is not offered to parents, but this is another service that is being considered for the future.

Children in need and child protection visits happen at a frequency in line with children's needs. Social workers spend meaningful time with children understanding their interests and observing their family life and experiences at home and in the community. Workers endeavour to speak with children alone to ascertain their wishes and feelings. Visits are thoughtfully and comprehensively recorded in a child-focused manner.

The successful introduction of the youth hub group has been well received by children and families alike. It is well attended by children, providing them with a space to meet each other and enjoy activities.

The process of reviewing assessments, in particular for short breaks, has taken longer as these assessments had not been completed previously. There is more work to do to ensure there is a clear framework and response for those children with additional needs or disabilities.

Overall, child protection planning has increased in its effectiveness, particularly over recent months. Effective processes are now in place, that previously were not, when children are at risk. There has been some delay in strategy discussions and child protection enquiries happening promptly to consider risk of significant harm to children. In part, this was due to embedding new procedures and managing the complexities of island life, police availability and transport issues. No immediate risk to children's situations was found to have occurred as a result. These delays have been challenged by the senior managers and resolved with the police. The situation has more recently improved, due to the increased effectiveness of local authority and partner working relationships, with greater expectation and accountability of staff and partners. Due to the local authority's geographical location, timely and effective sharing of police information when families go to the mainland has not always been achieved. These difficulties are being considered and addressed within multi-agency operational working groups.

Partner attendance at strategy meetings in relation to health and education, which was previously not consistent, has recently improved. The quality and recording of child protection enquiries are variable. In stronger examples, children are spoken to alone, and risks have been discussed with parents and analysed, but this is not always evident in children's records.

Initial child protection conferences happen promptly and reports are comprehensive, detailing the concerns to help parents improve their care of, and reduce risks to, children. Core group meetings are held regularly with, generally, the right people attending. Actions are considered and discussed with parents.

Overall, plans reflect the needs of children well, with actions defined to review children's progress. Child in need meetings and reviews are mostly well attended by professionals involved with the family, and while children do not generally attend, their views are captured and included throughout.

A small number of children have been identified as young carers. Variability exists in identifying and responding to these children. Leaders are aware that this is an area of development to be strengthened and are mapping local needs. Community activity to support young carers is being reviewed, to consider the best type of approach and resource to meet this need.

Staff supervision is mainly happening regularly. The quality of recording, evidence of reflection and clear actions to drive progress are not always apparent in documents. More recently, as systems and processes have been introduced, robust examples are evident.

Social workers feel supported by their managers and appreciate the supervision and guidance they receive while working in this unique and close community. Staff enjoy working with families and are helping to make a difference to children on the islands.

During this visit, parents consistently shared the positive impact of recent social work support in their lives, giving examples such as help with parenting strategies and access to counselling. Partners have also spoken optimistically about improved working relationships and the positive impact for children and families as a result.

There is a range of multi-agency and single agency training, such as on neglect and on the introduction of the new early help model, to support early intervention and help partners work with children's services in offering a consistent service.

Leaders and the council are not complacent. They know there is more to do to bring about and build on the fundamental change required to achieve long-term sustainability.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Sarah Canto
His Majesty's Inspector