

13 April 2026

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Dear Sue

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 10 and 11 March 2026. This was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in July 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Steve Lowe and Joy Howick.

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.

Headline findings

Since the last monitoring visit, social work practice and management oversight have significantly declined in quality and effectiveness. This was compounded over the Christmas period in particular. Due to poor management decisions, families were left with insufficient cover to respond to their needs. Children and families have experienced delays and insufficient support and protection when they need it. This is in part due to changes in staff and poor recruitment decisions. Of greater concern, senior leaders have had insufficient focus on quality assurance, sustainability and contingency planning. The speed and trajectory of improvement have stalled as a result.

The interim Director of Children's Services reinstated an operational lead, who had previously made positive progress and, as a result, practice has recently started to improve. A permanent senior leadership team is due to be in place shortly after this visit. Additional social work capacity has also very recently been secured. Leaders understand the need to ensure a more appropriate, consistent and timely response for children. Key safeguarding partners remain engaged in the improvement process, albeit with understandable anxiety about yet another new leadership team. Through a recent needs analysis and new children and young people's plan, the council does now have a clearer understanding of areas of focus and resource and has increased engagement with the local community.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Compared to the timely and appropriate responses children received at the time of the last monitoring visit, social work practice when referrals are made for help has been slow and confused. The majority of children and their families who are accessing support and services have experienced drift and delay before meaningful decisions and actions to support them are put in place. This includes missed opportunities to support families struggling with their children's school attendance, indecision over the level of risk posed by adults and a lack of professional curiosity about potential indicators of abuse.

In general, records are not added to the child's electronic file in a timely way and lack some key details to understand family history and the effectiveness of previous interventions. This includes a lack of consideration of family history.

When there are more significant concerns about children's safety, strategy meetings are attended by key partners but have been poorly coordinated. As a result, standards have dropped in terms of timeliness, communication, information-sharing and records of attendance. This pattern repeats when child protection inquiries are required. Initial safety planning is brief and rudimentary. There are, however, early

signs that this is improving, with recent changes in staffing bringing stronger oversight and clearer planning for children.

Appropriate policies and operating procedures for decision-making at the point of initial contact and beyond have been put in place since the full inspection in July 2023, and they are effective when applied, as seen on the last visit. However, the recent dip in performance demonstrates the importance of thorough and regular quality assurance and reporting, both of which have not been at a level that allows for early identification of poor practice.

Relatively low numbers of children are referred to social care, although many are families asking directly for help, indicating a potential increase in confidence that they will get the support they need. Despite this, since the last visit, many families have had to wait too long for support from children's social care and the early help available remains unclear and not fully resourced. In the interim, early years and primary healthcare staff in particular have remained effective in recognising where they can support families.

Once they are involved, social workers clearly know families well and help to identify strengths and underlying reasons for children struggling with some aspects of their lives. Social workers visit children in different settings to really get to know them and use novel approaches to engage with children.

However, there is limited evidence of visits to children having a clear purpose linked to what needs to be assessed or progressed. Although children's voices are clearly captured and valued, they do not consistently influence the next steps that are taken by professionals.

Parents that we spoke to during the visit have differing views on the quality and impact of social work, some having experienced positive relationships and support and others feeling frustrated with delays and slow progress. They welcome the recruitment of additional capacity to ensure that there will always be a social worker available in and out of office hours.

The assessment of children and families' needs and subsequent plans are often repetitive and difficult to follow, with more detail than analysis. Assessments rely too heavily on what parents would like the outcome to be rather than a professional evaluation of the strengths and vulnerabilities in the family. This leads to a lack of professional curiosity about other potential indicators of the impact of domestic abuse, for example. Subsequent plans often lack clarity about sequencing and priority for key actions or contingencies should the plan not work.

The quality of social work has also been undermined by a lack of effective management oversight and direction at some points since the last visit. Supervision

has been irregular and lacked reflection until recently when there have been signs of improvement.

Safeguarding partners maintain a positive attitude towards supporting the council's improvements and the new children and young people's plan. Strategically, there has been significant progress in identifying the specific needs of children and families, and increased engagement with the community in preparing a plan that has meaning for them. Senior leaders have utilised grant-funded support for this well. The council recognises the need for clear communication and timelines moving into the implementation phase, including clear expectations about who will deliver what and how families will know what difference has been made.

Similarly, some swift progress has been made to formulate a roadmap for the council's response to the social care reforms, but once external support ends, there is insufficient capacity to implement these changes unless elements of the children and young people's plan and the improvement agenda are incorporated into a single, well-communicated strategy.

Both quality assurance and performance management reporting have reduced in frequency and effectiveness since the last monitoring visit. Without these key pillars of assurance, corporate leaders have lost their line of sight to practice. Particularly with a whole new team of staff, political leaders are aware that stringent and independent oversight is essential to reinstate and build on the improvements that had previously been made.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Steve Lowe
His Majesty's Inspector