

National Overview Report in relation to care experienced children and young people



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Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.
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Foreword

At Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW), we are committed to raising standards and delivering positive outcomes for the most vulnerable children in our society.

We believe the children and young people of Wales who experience the care system are entitled for this to be both positive and transformative and that all looked after children should enjoy the same support and life chances as other children.

Our commitment to this is reflected in our decision to focus our 2018/19 review of local authority inspection and performance evaluation on the outcomes of children who entered the care system. As part of this review, we considered the impact of the Social Services Well-being Act on the lives of children who are looked after.

People are at the heart of who we are and what we do as an inspectorate. During this review, our inspection team spoke to children, young people, their families and carers to ensure our findings were informed by the direct experiences of children and young people. I am deeply grateful to everyone who gave up their

time to talk to us so honestly about their experiences. I would also like to thank each of the local authorities we inspected for the open and transparent way they enabled our inspections to take place and for recognising the inspection process as an opportunity to support and drive improvements in the care system.

The findings in this report, alongside those of our thematic review of children's homes, contribute to the work of the Welsh Government in improving outcomes for care experienced children and young people. We will continue to work collaboratively with our partners and stakeholders to support the most vulnerable children in our society and ensure the unique needs of each child is at the heart of what we do.



A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "G. Baranski". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Gillian Baranski
Chief Inspector

Rap composed and presented by a care experienced young person following an engagement event

Social Workers give me support and encouragement;
And they give us skills that are relevant;
So you can live in the house of independence;
Social Workers are good listeners and treat everyone with respect;

But they do poke their nose in your business;
They discuss with you what Pathway Plan you follow;
And make plans for a date and time which you can choose to attend;
They give you Support Worker to help you access training and benefits;
But they sometimes try to turn you into something you're not;
I have been encouraged to get involved in Youth Services;

The agenda is to work together to keep us safe;
Because all they want is in your best interests;

Social Services try to make a difference but it's a 50/50 chance;
I would like to see Social Services change their way;
Because they can be stuck in a big maze.

God help us all if he's real
Because we all need it

Introduction

This report summarises findings from Care Inspectorate Wales' (CIW) programme of work, undertaken throughout 2018, focussing on looked after children and care leavers. In this summary section we use the preferred term "care experienced children and young people" but the main body of the report uses the statutory terminology of "looked after children" and "care leavers".

Context

The legislative context is provided by the Social Services Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 (2014 Act). The Act includes responsibilities for local authorities to:

- support families to care for their children where safe to do so
- improve the stability and wellbeing outcomes for those children who are looked after, including accommodating children and young people close to their home or community.

The period since the implementation of the 2014 Act in April 2016 has seen an upward trend in the number of children being looked after.

This programme of work also provided an opportunity to reflect on the progress made in relation to findings and conclusions of earlier national reviews undertaken by CIW and other key stakeholders:

- National review of care planning for children and young people subject to public law outline pre proceedings December 2016
- Inspection of safeguarding and care planning for looked after children and care leavers who exhibit vulnerable and risky behaviors January 2015
- Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS) Cymru Position Statement on Children's Services, 2018
- Care Crisis Review 2018.

We took account of the significant work being undertaken in relation to care experienced children including:

- Improving outcomes for children Ministerial Advisory Group established in 2016
- Care experienced children and young people National Assembly for Wales public accounts committee, November 2018.

Sources of evidence

Evidence to inform this report was gathered from the findings of self-evaluations and data profiles completed by 22 local authorities in January 2018. These included intelligence regarding the profile of children and young people looked after, placement sufficiency, stability, the impact of the 2014 Act and compliance with regulatory requirements on placements of children outside of their local authority. Within the content of this report any data referred to as 'at 1 January 2018' has been taken from the self-evaluations completed by local authorities.

The report is also informed by the Welsh Government's looked after children census and children looked after (SSDA903) data collection. This data is referred to in the report 'as at 31 March 2018'. Where this data has been used please note to minimise the risk of unwanted disclosure of personal data numbers have been rounded to the nearest five.

Qualitative evidence was gathered between June and October 2018 from:

- Inspection of six local authority children's services
- Findings of six local authority fostering services
- Challenge meetings held with those local authorities not subject to an inspection
- Engagement activity with care experienced children, care leavers and foster carers.

During our inspection and engagement work we spoke to approximately a hundred children and young people and seventy seven carers. We focused on the questions relating to:

- People having access to information, advice and assistance
- People's experience of assessment
- People's experience of care and support and pathway planning
- People's experience of being safeguarded.

Key findings

Profile

The Evidence reviewed during inspection validated that children and young people in care were there appropriately and most had the necessary legal protection. We did not find evidence of children entering the looked after system who should not have done so.

Allied to the increasing number of children becoming looked after were changes noted to the legal profile. In particular there has been an increase in the number of children being supported to remain with their family or with their parents under legal looked after arrangements.

Sufficiency

Children and young people value the support provided by their foster carers, social workers and personal advisors. They attributed positive relationships as a significant factor in achieving their personal well-being outcomes.

It was positive to find an increase in the number of young people remaining in 'When I'm Ready' placements. This option needs to continue to be actively promoted.

We found significant variability in practice and local policy regarding when or whether a child cared for by the extended family should become looked after. Whilst fully accepting their responsibility to make this decision, local authorities' increasingly felt driven to accommodate children in these circumstances due to the expectations of the judiciary. This has created a divergence of position between children's services and the judiciary. Local authorities would welcome further national guidance in relation to this issue.

Most local authorities were struggling to meet their sufficiency duties and find suitable placements to meet the needs of children and young people. This adversely affecting placement choice, permanency and stability and consequently outcomes for children.

The needs and risks factors of children looked after have increased in complexity. There needs to be more urgency given to commissioning of a greater range of services and choice of placements to meet these complex needs by local authorities and their partners.

Practice

Greater understanding of the effectiveness of early intervention preventative services is needed along with strengthening step up and step down arrangements between early intervention and managed care services. Local authorities would benefit from being more open about their challenges and more effectively sharing learning with each other.

A better analysis of factors influencing children becoming looked after; the effectiveness of early intervention and preventive services; what works and what makes a difference would assist in planning effective targeted support services for children and families at the earliest opportunity.

Local authorities recognise the priority of actively directing resources to the safe reduction of children becoming looked after, including children placed out of local authority area. However, too little resource is focused on the delivery of responsive services for those families who were at risk of becoming or were already involved with statutory child protection systems

and legal proceedings. Further work is required to ensure the voice of the child is at the centre of care planning with an improved focus on how a child can achieve their personal well-being outcomes. Increased scrutiny and challenge of children and young people's care plans during the reviewing process by independent reviewing officers could help deliver this improvement.

There has been a growth in public proceedings with most local authorities having established sound arrangements for implementing the Public Law Outline (PLO). The best PLO arrangements provided consistency for children and their families and transparency of decision-making.

We found some effective multi-agency working and intensive support for families and carers where there were risks of significant harm. Overall we identified improvements still needed in multi-agency responses to safeguarding children, with the involvement of multi-agency partners at strategy discussions limited.

Partnership

We heard of good working relationships with partner agencies at an operational level. We saw a mixed picture of joint working with partner agencies at a strategic level, with significant further development needed to secure multi-agency partnership working and 'joined up practice' to ensure positive outcomes for children and families.

There is a need for urgent focus on securing better outcomes for looked after children with emotional and mental health needs, so they are able to access timely and appropriate support.

The need to reduce the number of looked after children and care leavers not-in-education, employment or training, has consistently been recognised as

a priority. However, while ambitions are high, more attention is required by corporate parents and local authorities to ensure improved education outcomes for care experienced children and young people.

Stability

Significant pressures upon the social work workforce and sufficiency of foster carers make it difficult for children and young people to secure the positive and stable relationships that mean so much to them. We found many occasions where children have suffered disruptions due to changes in social workers and a lack of appropriate placements to meet identified needs.

Strengthening working relationships with housing and local colleges were productive in gaining the additional level of support needed for some young people to succeed in living independently without any family support.

The quality of the relationship between foster carers and children was a key factor in the sustainability of a placement. Change of placement caused significant instability for children and young people. Foster carers told us improved information sharing before the commencement of a placement would have reduced the impact of such changes and enabled more effective matching.

Governance and corporate parenting

We found the importance and value of performance information to be well established in children services. This is a positive development as in the past we had identified deficits in the quality of performance information in social services as an early indicator of concern.

Improved engagement with children, young people, parents and carers would help local authorities to better plan and

implement strategies to support families and inform commissioning arrangements.

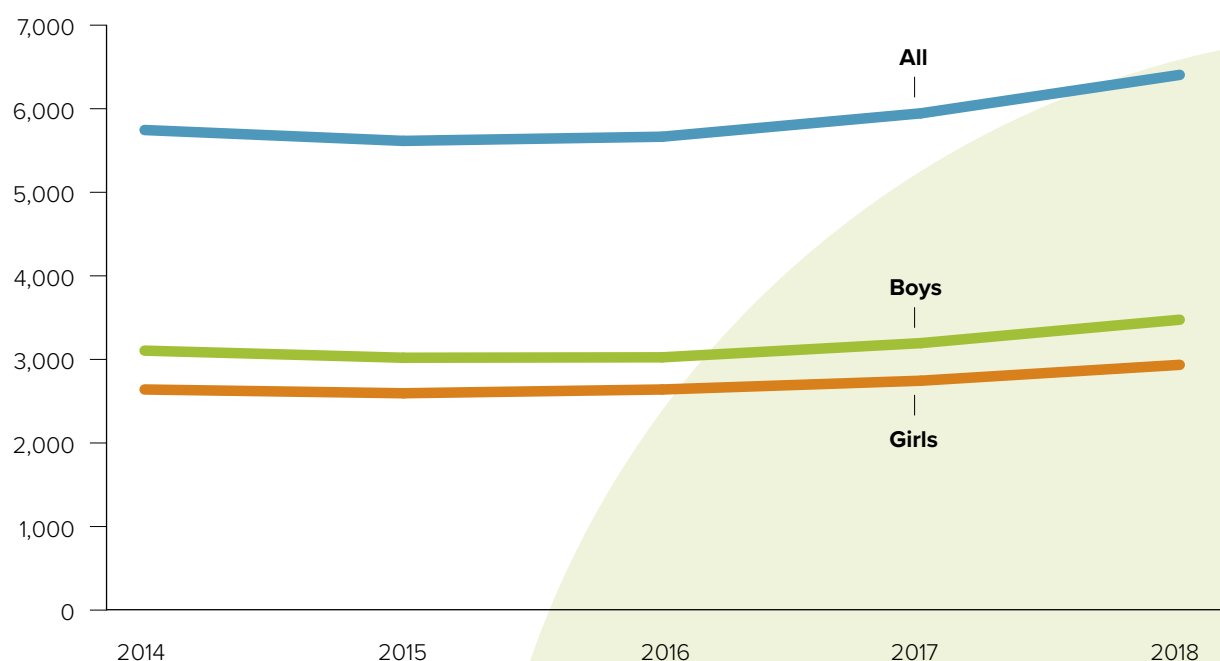
Corporate parenting arrangements need clearer governance and performance management to enable board members to provide effective challenge with a more rigorous focus on understanding the impact interventions and services have on the outcomes for looked after children.

Part 1:

The profile of looked after children

What we know

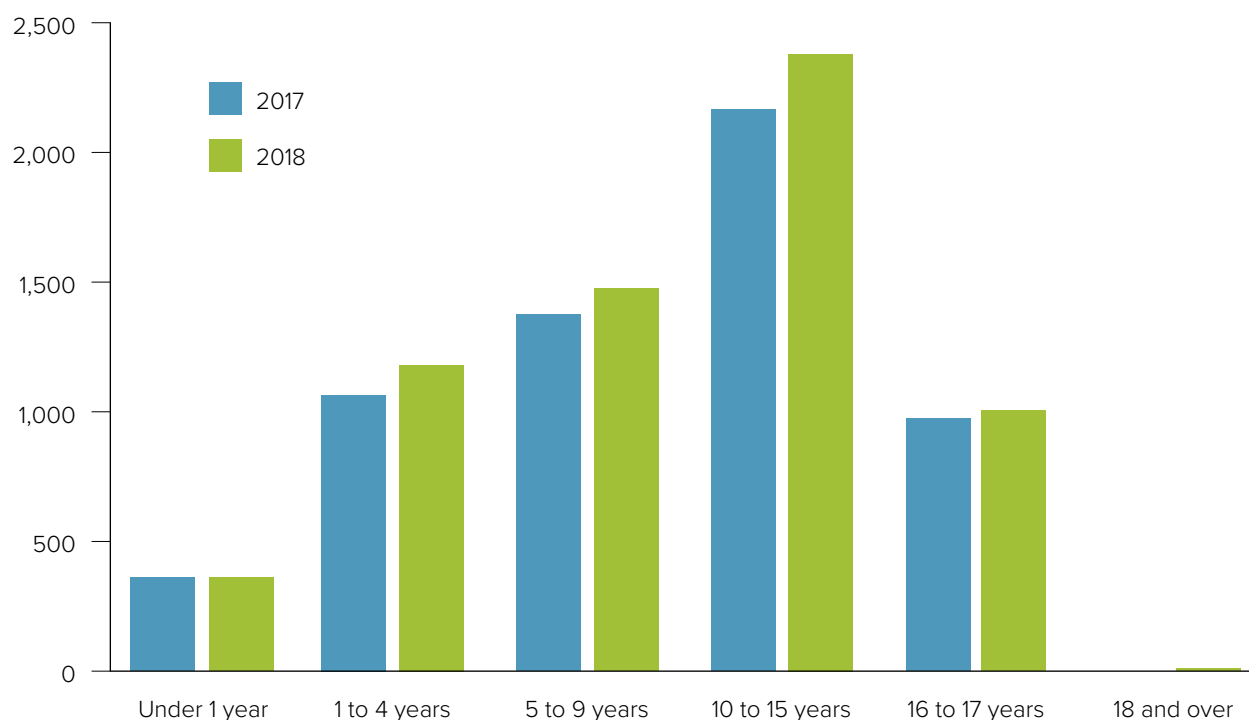
Figure 1: Wales looked after children annual population and gender trend



Source: <https://statswales.gov.wales>, Children looked after by local authorities, by age and gender, at 31 March 2018

- From the 31 March 2014 to 31 March 2018, the number of looked after children in Wales increased from 5,745 to 6,405, an increase of 11.5%.
- The increase in looked after children shows more children started to be looked after in 2017/2018 than left care.
- As at 31 March 2018, 102 children per 10,000 of the population were looked after, a 13% increase in the last three years.
- The age profile of looked after children on 31 March 2018 is broadly similar to the age distribution presented on the same date in 2017, as illustrated in Figure 2. Although a slightly larger increase in the number of looked after children can be observed for the 10 to 15 years age group.

Figure 2: Annual comparison of looked after children by age range



Source: <https://statswales.gov.wales>, Children looked after by local authorities, by age and gender, at 31 March 2018

- As at 31 March 2018 92% of looked after children were white; 3% were of Mixed ethnic groups; 2% were Asian or Asian British; 1% were Black, African, Caribbean or Black British and 1% were from other ethnic groups.
- Over the last five years the proportion of looked after children of non-white ethnicity has remained stable.
- The numbers of care leavers in Wales has increased slightly by 0.5% as at 31 March 2018.
- As at the 31 March 2017 and 2018, the population aged 16 to 24 leaving care increased from 2193 to 2204, an increase of 0.5% (11).

What we found

Most local authorities were confident that, despite increasing numbers, there was no evidence those children entering the looked after system should not have done so. Evidence reviewed during inspection confirmed children and young people in care were there appropriately and most had the necessary legal protection; the only caveat was the nature of the order needed when a child was placed within the family.

There is significant variability in practice and local policy regarding when or whether a child cared for by the extended family should become looked after. Whilst fully accepting their responsibility to make this decision, children's services felt increasingly driven to accommodate children in these circumstances due to the expectations of the judiciary. This has created a divergence of position between directors of social services and the judiciary across Wales. Local authorities would welcome further national guidance in relation to this issue.

Local authorities reported a growth in both the number of referrals of children and young people and in the complexity of needs and risks. The presence of coexisting issues such as domestic abuse, mental health and substance misuse, all key indicators of harm and contributors to neglect, were more prevalent and increasingly entrenched.

A number of local authorities also described recent trends in the type of referral they were receiving, for example increases in the number of pre-birth assessments.

There was growing evidence that even where care and support services had

already been provided, the needs of children looked after are increasing in complexity. This then directly affects the range, availability and cost of placements.

Local authorities along with their partners would benefit from improved analysis of the factors contributing to a child becoming looked after and children's identified needs. This could better inform commissioning and permanency strategies.

For some children and particularly young people, voluntary accommodation can be appropriate to meet their needs and to support their families. Local authorities need to be confident they have systems in place to ensure the rights of parents and children when looked after on a voluntary basis.

We found most local authorities had developed numerical profiles of the children and young people in their care, leaving care and on the edge of care. Managers with direct operational responsibility for looked after children had a comprehensive understanding of the needs of their cohort and advocate effectively on their behalf. However, wider corporate systems for developing a shared understanding of the needs of children in care were less well developed.

Local authorities with their partners would benefit from developing, an annual looked after children and care leavers needs analysis, to inform their commissioning and permanency strategies. Also to ensure levels of risk are being identified and managed appropriately.

For most local authorities the safe reduction of children in care, and in

particular children placed out of authority, was a priority and they were directing resources to safe reduction strategies. Despite the attention being given to this agenda, ‘spikes’ in numbers of children becoming looked after continued.

The background to the increase in rates of children looked after is multi-faceted and complex. They are well defined in research and during our programme of work with local authorities we found a number of common factors as outlined below:

Increase in demand: All local authorities reported an increase in activity in relation to both early intervention and referrals to children’s services.

Socio- economic deprivation:

The interaction between socio economic deprivation and factors that affect parenting capacity, including parents’ own childhood experiences, were recognised as affecting the resilience of families and contributing to growing service pressures

Increased awareness and expectations:

Society often has inconsistent views on ‘acceptable parenting’ but is vociferous about what should have happened when things go wrong. Local authorities found heightened public awareness, raised expectations and the improved reporting of abuse and neglect had all affected service demand and levels of intervention.

Legal status of looked after children

Table 1: Legal status of looked after children in Wales as at 1 January 2018

Under section 76 of the 2014 Act (formerly section 20 Children’s Act)	11.4%
Subject to a full care order	66.8%
Subject to a full care order and the requirements of children NOT placed with their parents	54.7%
Subject to a full care order and the requirements of children placed with their parents	12.1%
Subject to an interim care order	11.0%
Subject to an interim care order and the requirements of children NOT placed with their parents	9.0%
Subject to an interim care order and the requirements of children placed with their parents	2.0%
Only looked after by reason of being remanded to local authority accommodation (including secure children’s homes)	0.2%

NB: Percentages will not total to 100%

Source: Local authority self-evaluation data collection, 1 January 2018

What we know

- As at 31 March 2018 the majority (80%) of children were looked after under a care order.
- The numbers of children looked after under a care order has increased 11% from 31 March 2017 to 31 March 2018.
- As at 31 March 2018 the number children looked after for a single period on a voluntary basis was 640 compared to 1215 at the same date in 2014, a decrease of 47%.
- As at 1 January 2018 13% (851) of looked after children were placed with their parents.
- On the 1 January 2018 1177 children were placed within kinship or connected carers.

What we found

We found changes in legislation, including the requirements of the PLO, had significantly affected practice and the legal profile of the looked after children population.

Local authorities reported significant growth in the volume of care proceedings with 89% of children subject to a care order as at 1 January 2018. However, the overall numbers of children placed with connected carers or with parents had also more than tripled from 580 in 2014/15 to 2028 at 1 January 2018.

Most local authorities had established sound arrangements for implementing the PLO.

We found the best arrangements provided consistency for children and their families and transparency of decision-making.

We found a children's rights ethos driving practice across the pre-proceeding process and a strong commitment to maintaining children within the family where safe to do so. There was good evidence of children and young people involved in pre proceedings being diverted from court.

The Welsh courts' acceptance of applications and the number of resulting orders provides confidence and independent scrutiny that local authorities were applying the risk of harm threshold appropriately. There were occasions where the judiciary feedback to local authorities that protective action should have been taken sooner, even though care and support services were provided to mitigate harm. This was often in relation to neglect issues.

Local authorities noted the legal profile of their looked after children was changing. Issues identified by local authorities included:

Principle of no order: Local authorities were confident the threshold for the application of orders is being appropriately applied with families where there has been a persistent or repeated lack of sufficient change. However, concerns were raised that legislative changes have resulted in the principle of 'no order' becoming increasingly lost.

Family placements: Previously children's services were involved in facilitating family care arrangements, with parent's agreement children were supported to live within family networks without public law proceedings or becoming 'looked after'.

The increase in family fostering arrangements had resulted in a shortfall in availability of local authority placements due to the focus on supporting connected placements and the limited capacity within the fostering service to meet these needs. This was evident in our fostering inspections. Fostering services were better placed to manage these demands when there was a dedicated team to support family/connected fostering placements.

Placement with parents: Local authorities described changing practice in relation to the increasing number of children being looked after by their parents where the threshold of harm had been met and a Care Order granted, enabling a local authority to share parental responsibility with parents. At times, this was contrary to the children's services proposed care and support plan at the outset of family law care proceedings.

Voluntary accommodation (Section 76): The significant rise in the number of children in Wales subject to a care order has resulted in a reduction in the use of voluntary accommodation.

The need for public assurance and the expectations of the courts appears to have increasingly resulted in de-facto policy and practice that court action is always merited to secure permanence. Concerns have been raised in recent court judgements regarding failures of voluntary arrangements, and the need to prevent drift and ensure capacity and informed consent of parents are taken seriously by local authorities. It was positive that most local authorities had established mechanisms with the courts to ensure scrutiny of such voluntary occasions.

However, for some children and particularly young people, voluntary accommodation can limit the amount of time spent in care and is a potentially valuable and legitimate service. If local authorities are to reclaim the use of these arrangements they need to be confident they have robust systems in place to oversee them and ensure they are not subject to misuse.

What children, young people and carers told us about their experience of local authority support

If not for the local authority “I would have been in prison or on the streets”.

“Was happy that she was placed in care as she wouldn’t have felt safe”.

Whilst clearly stating she was very happy and content in her current placement, she described her initial placement as “the worst experience of her life”.

“The best place was in foster care, but would have benefited from having been looked after sooner”.

Part 2:

Sufficiency

What we know

- As of the 1 January 2018 local authorities reported 1725 approved foster carers providing 2817 foster placements compared to 1740 carers providing 2638 placements as at 31 March 2017. A net gain of 179 placements.
- Of the 29 % of children living outside their local authority, 15% were in a neighboring Welsh authority, 9% in Welsh non-neighboring and 5% lived outside Wales.
- As of 1 January 2018 the majority of care leavers aged 16 or 17 no longer looked after by the local authority were living within the authority area, with 32% of care leavers having returned to live within their birth families, 7% were in supported/semi-independent accommodation and 46% were in independent living.

What we found

The lack of range and choice of placements had a significant impact on outcomes for children and their experience of being looked after. This included a lack of strategic planning and recruitment strategies in local authority fostering services to enable them to provide placements to children which provided choice and stability.

The quality of the relationship between foster carers and children was a key factor in the sustainability of a placement. Change of placement caused significant instability for children and young people. Foster carers told us improved information sharing before the commencement of a placement would have reduced the impact of such changes and enabled more effective matching processes.

There is a need to better understand the growth in demand to fully inform future recruitment strategies and tailor effective training programmes.

Increased focus is needed on the oversight of out of county placements and the notifications made about these arrangements to a panel. Most local authorities had panels in place to consider the placement of children out of authority area and comply with the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (Wales) Regulations 2015. Local Authorities are aware of the need to improve panel arrangements and were working on a regional basis to improve consistency. This is an area for improvement across Wales.

Most local authorities were struggling to meet their sufficiency duties and meet the placement needs of their growing looked after children population. Most described deficits in placement sufficiency adversely affecting placement choice, permanency and stability.

However, more effective local authorities had projected the growing need. The national shortage of appropriate placements is well known. The increase in the numbers of looked after children and in placement costs had resulted in a forecast budgetary overspend in most local authorities and this created service and workforce pressures across Wales.

All local authorities could demonstrate the analysis and decisive action they had taken, including targeted action, to find families to meet children's assessed needs and to promote permanency planning. However, this is an increasing area of challenge. We found in our fostering inspections a lack of focus on the recruitment of local authority foster carers and on matching placements to best meet children's needs. This was due to increased demands on fostering teams to support family/connected fostering placements.

We have found the lack of availability of suitable placements to meet children and young people's assessed needs has resulted in some children being placed in unregistered settings.

Lack of sufficiency has been particularly marked where children have significantly complex needs and where a secure placement is required. Some children and young people have been placed far away from their community in other parts of the UK outside Wales.

In relation to the recruitment of foster carers, we found differences between local authorities with some reporting they were still able to recruit foster carers unlike their neighbouring partners. With most local authorities having actively benchmarked their payment and support schemes it was not clear why such differences existed.

Those local authorities with a more mixed economy of provision including directly provided and commissioned residential placements, had shown some greater resilience in promoting choice.

It was noted more local authorities were working with their housing departments and private property owners to extend the range of both their residential provision and accommodation for care leavers.

Local authorities were increasingly working regionally and collaboratively through organisations such as the Children's Commissioning Consortia Cymru. Work was also being progressed through regional partnership boards in relation to developing collaborative services for children and young people with complex needs; often using monies secured from Integrated Care Fund. There is a need for regional partnership boards to assure themselves that services commissioned are targeted to meet identified needs and demand.

Impact on children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people had suffered because of a lack of a sufficient range and choice of available placements. Local authorities had matching arrangements in place, but many examples were seen where the overriding matching determinant was simply the availability of a placement. In these circumstances, there can be little opportunity for children and young people to influence decisions about where they live.

During our engagement sessions with children and young people they frequently referenced the changes of placement they had experienced which had caused them significant instability. For example, one young person described having

six different placements in an eight month period. Another young person told us they had moved placements six times in two years and on each occasion had not been told the names of the foster carers in advance, or anything about them. Several shared they had to move school up to four times.

Some foster carers told us they knew very little about the young people who were about to live with them. They questioned the suitability and effectiveness of the matching process. Inadequate preparation such as this has the potential for needs and risks not being addressed effectively and means placements can be de-stabilised very quickly.

We found particular lack of choice in placements for teenagers. This sometimes resulted in young people being placed, at least initially, in settings that are unable to meet their often complex emotional and behavioural needs and makes them vulnerable to placement breakdown. This was also found to be one of the main factors for children and young people requiring out of local authority area placements.

It was positive that take up of 'When I'm Ready' placements had increased, supporting 189 young people as at 1 January 2018. This option needs to continue to be actively promoted.

Local authorities identified the projected growth in the number of care leavers and the potential increase in demand for 'When I'm Ready' placements will result in additional financial pressures. They also recognised the tension of meeting future demand for 'When I'm Ready' placements without having a detrimental impact on placement choice for other looked after children. This potential growth in demand needs to directly inform future foster care recruitment and training programs.

We found many children and young people benefitted from living in safe stable placements and in accommodation that met their needs. The relationship with their foster carer continued to be the most significant factor in determining how children and young people viewed their care experience. We saw evidence of innovative and bespoke packages of support to sustain placements.

Children and young people told us

“I feel that I can talk to my foster carers and I really respect them”.

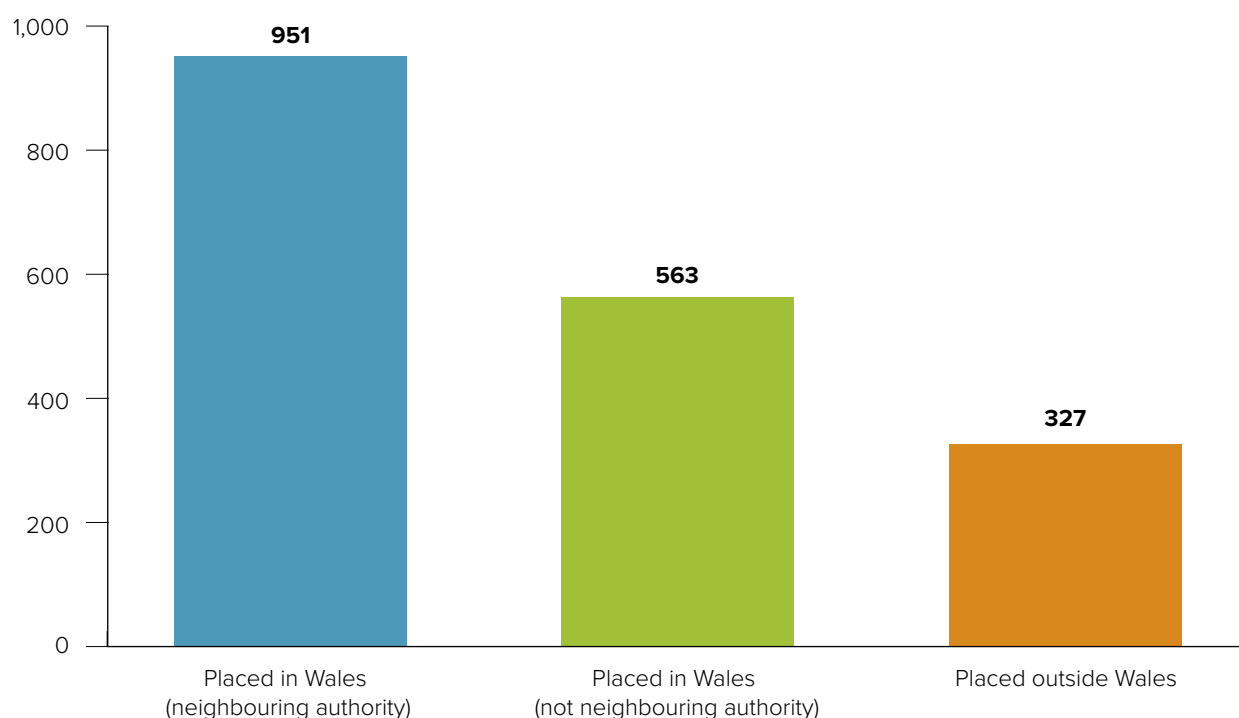
“My foster carers are brilliant and I look up to them as role models and learn from their behaviours and responses to everyday life”.

“My carers have ensured that I have everything that I need in life to succeed and I am very proud at being looked after by them and a part of their lives”.

Out of local authority placements

What we know

Figure 3: Out of authority placements of looked after children in Wales as at 1 January 2018



Source: Local authority self-evaluation data collection, 1 January 2018

What we found

We found the majority of children placed in out of authority placements were in Wales with most local authorities having panels in place to consider these arrangements.

There was evidence that where panels were well established with consistent and sufficiently senior membership to make decisions, they brought together intelligence and analysis of a child's needs and some rigour and challenge

regarding the need for the placement to be out of county. The panel mechanism also allowed for assurance regarding the capacity of proposed placement to meet the child's assessed educational, health and social needs.

However, we found the functioning of the panels to be variable and often undermined by such issues as lack of consistent attendance, lack of good information and a poor focus on quality and outcomes. From the notifications

figures in **Table 2** the percentage of children referred to a panel which considered out of county placements was low. This is an area in need of increased focus.

Evidence we reviewed suggested that that children who were placed out of county mainly received the same level

of involvement from children’s services as those who lived locally. Social workers maintained responsibility, kept a regular visiting pattern and also used technologies such as skype and text to stay in touch. The engagement and oversight of other partners was more variable to the detriment of children.

Notifications of out of area placements

What we know

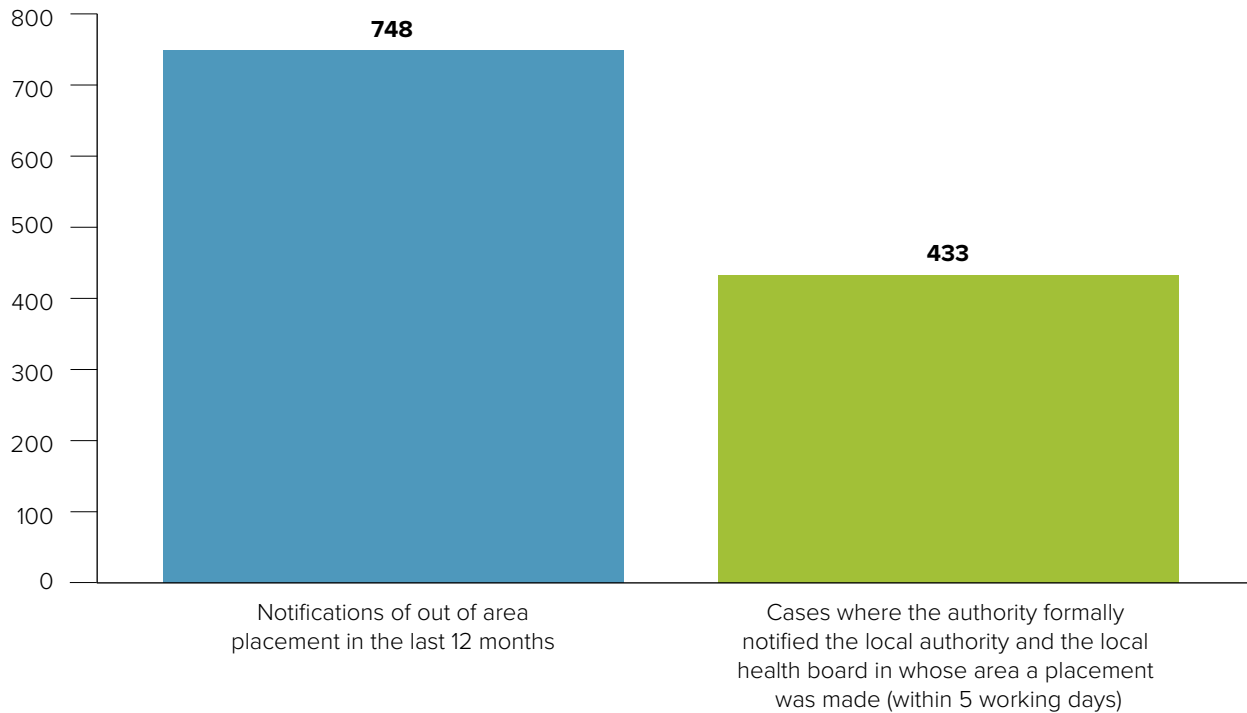
Table 2: Placement panel results as at 1 January 2018

	Looked after children placed out of area in the last 12 months	Were referred to a placement panel in accordance with guidance prior to the out of area placement being made	Were designated as emergency placements and were referred to the panel no later than 25 working days after the placement was made	Requirement not met
Wales	712	29.9%	33.8%	22.7%

Source: Local authority self-evaluation data collection, 1 January 2018

Most local authorities were confident they complied with requirements and had administrative processes in place to ensure notifications were sent to receiving authorities. They were less confident they routinely received notifications from local authorities placing children in their county.

Figure 4: Notification arrangements as at 1 January 2018



Source: Local authority self-evaluation data collection, 1 January 2018

Most local authorities acknowledged their panel arrangements did not include representatives from placing authorities, nor had they been invited to contribute to receiving local authority's panels.

Practice arrangements

Our programme of work considered the experience of children and their families becoming looked after from first contact to leaving care. This section summarises our findings at key points in this journey.

Access arrangements and early intervention services

What we found

Local authorities have developed a number of new or revised service models to enable compliance with Sec 17, Part 2 of the 2014 Act, concerning Information, Advice and Assistance (IAA).

Examples included:

- Relocation of early intervention services within the same directorate as social services, including in some instances co-location of council and third sector or partner agency staff (for example from families first team around the family). This model aims to secure a whole system governance within one place.
- Early intervention services located outside of the social services directorate, underpinning broader corporate accountability and aimed at drawing more effectively on the widest menu of services offered across a broader range of community-facing directorates.

We did not find evidence to conclude one configuration was better than another, with all models having advantages and disadvantages as explored below. It is important local authorities are open about their experiences and share their learning with each other.

Location within Children's Social Services

In some instances, these arrangements had reinforced any pre-existing tendency to see intervention primarily as a social services responsibility. Universal agencies were more inclined to refer to the local authority social services department before exhausting less intrusive interventions.

This compounded the risk of social services being overwhelmed with too many 'lower level' concerns which absorbed significant screening and assessment resources. This created a further risk with the volume of demand making it difficult to prioritise higher risk referrals.

We were also told of an increased tendency for agencies to make referrals for early prevention services, without seeking prior consent of families.

The location of information, advice and assistance (IAA) function within children's services nevertheless has potential to ensure once individual children are identified as experiencing some level of risk, they will be more likely to receive the right level of attention at an early stage,

rather than being misdirected to a wider range of more generalist support services.

Importantly, it also meant the identification of risk at the threshold between provision of family support or more formal social work intervention and the nature and timing of next steps, was more effectively overseen by professionals with experience of child protection work; this was true only where these same professionals were not overwhelmed with a volume of ineligible referrals.

Location outside of Children’s Social Services

Section 17 Part 2, clearly aligns responsibility for the effectiveness of IAA services with the duties of the local authority per se and reinforces the link between prevention and its pre-eminent well-being duties. To this extent, this approach appears to enable the local authority to maximise its whole system offer:

*“It (IAA) **must** promote early intervention and prevention to ensure that people of all ages can be better supported to achieve their personal outcomes and explore options for meeting their care and support needs. It should be considered to be a preventative service in its own right through the provision of high quality and timely information, advice and assistance.”*
(Para 297, Code of Practice Part 2 General Functions)

What was less clear was whether these arrangements succeeded in making the range of existing services more accessible or whether they simply offered a largely unchanged range of support that is highly variable in terms preventing the escalation of need.

The location of early intervention outside of a social services directorate equally meant any mitigation of need for managed care and support from social services was significantly dependent upon the ability of the directorates to work together.

Regardless of how information, assistance and advice (IAA) services are delivered, they need to be able to respond to the complex and challenging needs of families and to promote children and young people remain living at their family home safely and to be able to achieve their personal well-being outcomes. There needs to be a range of tailored and sustainable support packages to prevent children becoming looked after.

Early interventions and managed care and support services

Local authorities were all working to maximise the opportunity to promote more timely engagement with families when the threshold for social work led care and support services was not met. The commitment to early intervention requires time and investment if it is to deliver the ambition to reduce the number of children requiring social work managed care.

Although local authorities and their partners recognised the importance of programmes to support children and families at the earliest stages, (e.g. Families First), few had a shared and comprehensive understanding of the needs of looked after children and young people on the threshold of care or currently looked after.

Whilst the drive to deliver early intervention services is positive, relying on the same range of services

that have existed for some time, however configured, will not provide the tailored and sustainable support packages needed to divert children entering the care system.

The risk we identified was too little resource being focused on the delivery of intelligent and responsive services for those families who were at risk of becoming or were already involved with child protection systems and legal proceedings. Staff and partners highlighted restricted access to resources as one of the most challenging parts of their work. Local authorities need to develop systems to understand and evaluate the relationship between assessed need, the services they deliver, what works and what makes a difference for families across all levels of engagement.

Greater understanding of the effectiveness of early intervention preventative services is needed along with strengthening step up and step down arrangements between early intervention and social work led care and support. Local authorities would benefit from being more open about their challenges and more effective in sharing learning with each other.

We highlighted the following issues in relation to the interface between early intervention and social work led care and support need to be addressed:

- **Family's willingness to engage in preventative services** – early intervention services require consent. 'What matters' to families is changeable and even where services are agreed as helpful and have been offered, families do not always engage with them or sustain their involvement.

- **Barriers to access preventive services** – thresholds for eligibility can restrict access for families, even where they have eligible needs.
- **Sustainability of future funding arrangements** – A number of early intervention services were subject to waiting lists and these were often attributed to delays in commissioning and recommissioning due to reliance on grant funding.
- **Service pressures** – Some local authorities' noted service pressures meant families who may have once received early services were no longer eligible and early intervention services were increasingly addressing the needs of more vulnerable families.
- **Referral arrangements** systems for managing referrals to early prevention and children's social services including step-up and step-down arrangements, is very variable across Wales and local authorities were working to identify the most effective model.

What children and young people told us

Supporting children at the earliest opportunity is crucial in securing positive outcomes. Most children and young people spoken to felt the local authority had kept them safe, but a key message was they would have benefitted from more information about how to keep themselves safe from an earlier age for example about drug use.

Advocacy was fully recognised as important for many children and young people to represent their views and reflect their circumstances. Young people explained how advocacy had helped them feel more confident to express a

view. For example, a young person used the help of an advocate to help present her view about a proposed change of school which was at odds with that of her social worker.

Young people talked positively about services, including third sector support that helped them to identify accommodation, live independently and gain employment. Social workers and personal assistants were an important source of support when mistakes were made and when this support was absent, care leavers found they could become isolated.

Safeguarding

What we found

Local authorities had some well-developed information systems to support oversight of compliance in respect of child protection procedures.

Children and young people were mainly well protected through the effective application of safeguarding and child protection thresholds. Evidence we reviewed, no children were seen to be left at immediate risk. However, from the fostering inspections we found a need to improve safe care plans and more robust risk assessments which identified risks and linked these to plans which sought to mitigate them.

Child protection enquiries were mainly timely and informed by decisions made in strategy meetings, however the quality of strategy discussions was inconsistent. The involvement of wider agencies in strategy discussions is limited, restricting the range of information discussed.

Child protection enquiries were led by suitably qualified but not always experienced social workers. In some circumstances, where agreement was made to undertake child protection investigations jointly with the police, these did not subsequently take place due to capacity issues. This meant families in complex situations were not always fully supported by an appropriate multi-agency response. The police did not always send a warranted officer, nor consistently attend review child protection conferences. This means the conference does not always benefit from a wider multidisciplinary discussion of risk or wider contribution to the plan to safeguard children and young people.

Findings and decisions in relation to significant harm were clear and resulted in action, including urgent action needed to protect children and young people. We saw evidence of some effective multi-agency working and intensive support provided to families and carers in cases where there were risks of significant harm.

Formal arrangements to consider the need for a child protection care and support plan mainly worked well. Reports were more consistently provided by all agencies, but these would benefit from being consistently shared with or understood by parents in advance of the meeting.

The resulting plans seen identified the key risks, critical concerns and the strengths within the family and carers' network. They were however often poorly recorded and mainly remain task and activity driven. A lack of timescales meant parents and professionals were not clear about when things have to change over the long term.

Core group meetings were mainly held in accordance with guidance, but plans were hampered by inconsistent attendance by professionals. These meetings were not well recorded and there was often a lack of clarity regarding what actions were required by when and why. The better quality work we saw clearly identified progress against measurable outcomes.

A number of local authorities had introduced or were piloting a Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub; the structural arrangements for these varied however the intention was always to improve information sharing and the management of referrals, particularly those relating to domestic abuse.

All local authorities had national and local guidance and protocols in place for multi-agency responses to children at risk of child sexual exploitation (CSE), those displaying harmful sexual behaviour and those who go missing.

Considerable awareness, attention and work was focused on the identification of these issues. Local authorities were alive to the relationship between children's and young people's vulnerability; the decisions for a child to become looked after; impact on placement stability and how looked after children are supported.

Despite the improved systems in place to mitigate harm or potential harm, the relationship between risk management and child protection pathways was not always well defined.

Whilst most local authorities had arrangements to evaluate the effectiveness of the plan on the child's safety and well-being these often did not evidence the child or young person's view of the plan, their ownership of the plan

or the difference they felt it has made to them. The assessments seen were mainly timely, but some were not completed within children's timescales.

Assessments

What we found

We saw some good quality assessments with a strong focus on the child and their social and family networks. However, the overall quality was variable and needed improvement. It was not always evident from records if children were being seen alone nor if there was a shared understanding, when this was age appropriate.

We found a mixed level of understanding about proportionate assessment and heard social workers express confusion about the need to complete all elements of assessment. Some struggled with the requirements to identify and build on people's strengths and balance this with the presenting or perceived risks, while keeping the focus on the child's wellbeing needs.

Many assessments reviewed did not include a sufficiently clear analysis, based on consideration of history balanced against current strengths, challenges and risks. This meant professionals and families in complex situations did not always have a shared understanding of the issues.

Whilst we generally found decision-making to be appropriate to need, assessments did not always explain the rationale for recommended action and we saw little recorded evidence of robust challenge by managers.

Greater engagement with families as part of the assessment process and an

improved clarity of analysis of risk and need would support a fuller understanding of issues by children, parents and carers.

Assessments were not always appropriately revisited in light of changing circumstances. Where this did happen the assessments seen were often a repetition of past issues, rather than consideration of the impact of the new information.

Where local authorities were using a whole service model to underpin practice, this helped to support a shared organisational understanding of strengths and risks. The voice of the child could be strengthened within assessments to ensure plans capture what matters to children and young people.

Most local authorities were still working to convert their understanding of assessed need to identification of outcomes and make the bridge between assessment and care and support planning.

The step-up and step-down arrangements between early intervention and social work led care and support generally needed to be strengthened and kept under review.

Assessments for pathway plans were not always timely nor consistently engaging young people effectively. This is a lost opportunity to ensure care leavers understand their rights and how they need to be supported to live independently.

Care planning

What we found

We saw evidence of often extensive interventions being provided to try to maintain children and young people safely within their families. Decision making in

the minority demonstrated a history of missed early opportunities to intervene to improve children's circumstances. In other occasions, particularly those involving neglect intervention, should have been escalated sooner.

Local authorities use of performance information has increasingly helped to ensure looked after children and young people had timely care and support or pathway plans in place and these were systematically reviewed.

Whilst some good quality care and support and pathway plans were seen reflecting direct work undertaken with children, young people and their families, the overall quality was inconsistent. Care and support plans need to be strengthened in to focus on children and young people's well-being outcomes and goals set to achieve these. Often care and support plans were focused on task and activities with a lack of clarity on timescales.

It was not always clear plans derived from a current assessment. For example whilst the care plans for looked after children were usually routinely updated following a looked after children review, this was rarely informed by an updated assessment.

There was often insufficient evidence of co-production of plans with families. Many plans we saw were formulaic and not outcome focused. We found current care planning formats did not support social workers to evidence the overarching plan or the long-term goals for the child. This makes it difficult for children and young people and their families to understand their progress and 'future journey'.

The current volume of older looked after children mean there will be a significant increase in the number of care leavers over the next two years. We saw improvements in the performance of pathway planning with over 90% of care leavers with a pathway plan in place. However, the pathway plans seen were not of a consistently good enough quality. The quality of the assessment and the resulting plans were often dependent on the social workers experience and understanding of leaving care services.

Senior managers in some local authorities were redesigning their arrangements as they had already identified that personal advisors were introduced too late and this did not support young people to form good initial relationships.

The workforce and commissioning strategies of local authorities need to be better informed by the predicted profile of looked after children and young people leaving care to ensure they have sufficient current and future social work and personal advisor capacity.

We saw best practice in 14 plus teams or specialist leaving care teams, which offered a holistic service including preparation for leaving care. These teams were often found to have stronger links with community organisations, which could potentially provide longer-term support for the young person.

What children and young people told us

Once in care, many children and young people receive timely support from their carers and social workers. Some children described positive experiences, for example with foster carers who considered them part of a family and helped them feel 'listened to'.

Some young people did not find their pathway plans a useful document. For example, some young person did not have a clear view of their emotional and physical health needs or their health histories.

Despite some very positive approaches to leaving care and the real efforts made by social workers and personal advisors to smooth transitions, many care leavers told us although nothing really changed, at 16 they felt the weight of becoming a care leaver. Young people described that as a looked after child 'you're not being able to make decisions because it's all about being safe' and they felt 'over protected'. In contrast as a care leaver, it is 'all about being independent' and making decisions including 'where you are going to live'.

Whilst acknowledging their non-looked after peers were also looking to the future, they identified it was 'more intense' for those who had experienced care. For example, the need to complete pathway plans made it feel more immediate and 'was just more pressure'. This was at a time when they were also preparing for exams and, for some young people, coincided with a transfer to a new social worker and the introduction of a personal advisor. Older care leavers equally described having felt 'unprepared to talk about leaving care and unprepared to leave'.

Reviews of looked after children's care and support plans

What we found

Reviews were timely and children were generally encouraged to contribute and supported to attend their reviews. Whilst most authorities had quality

assurance mechanisms in place, some did not proactively monitor children's attendance.

Advocacy was offered pro-actively and this was well recorded in the review record. All local authorities had formal advocacy services available for looked after children and care leavers. These commissioned services were mainly issue based and relied on the children and young people opting in, this means some children who might benefit from the service were not independently represented at decision-making meetings.

The review templates we saw often resulted in the repetition of information including a continuing focus on what had caused the child to become looked after. The record did not always capture the progress made, outcomes achieved or the longer-term plan.

We found the views of children and families was often poorly recorded and it was not always clear how decisions had been reached or whether everyone involved, including the child/young person, agreed. There was often little evidence of how well children and young people viewed their plans as 'working for them'.

Local authorities were confident their independent reviewing services were compliant with guidance and the independent reviewing officer arrangements were able to maintain independence from operational services.

The increase in number of looked after children; the number of reviews resulting from unplanned changes in placement and the number of children placed out of authority have impacted on caseloads and affected the capacity of the independent

reviewing officers (IROs) and not all children are seen and spoken to by IROs prior to their review. There are however, strong attempts to keep continuity for children by ensuring they keep the same IRO. In the self-evaluation data return local authorities identified over 80% of IROs had chaired the child's previous review.

The role of the IRO in relation to reviews of care leavers plans was inconsistent and often determined by the capacity of the team. Significant differences were found across Wales in relation to the IRO wider duty to monitor the local authorities overall performance as a corporate parent. Whilst this role is valued by senior officers improvement is needed to ensure independent reviewing officers have the capacity and mandate to discharge this function.

We found evidence IROs were increasingly monitoring children and young people between reviews and many routinely examined both compliance and quality for example in relation to statutory visiting. Most IROs were confident they could escalate any concerns about a child's wellbeing or lack of progress both to team managers and senior officers as needed and issues would be taken seriously and addressed.

What children, young people and carers told us

Some of children and young people we spoke to told us they felt disengaged from the care review process. This was exacerbated because they felt unable to influence decisions. For example several children said they were made to 'feel more different' because their reviews 'had to be held at school so that the teacher could attend'.

Some provided very positive feedback about their reviews and the role of the IRO. For example a young person described how her next review was imminent and she was able to choose which professionals involved with her could attend. Others talked about chairing their meeting and having discussions that were relevant and they could contribute to.

Many young people found the review process boring and not a means to help them talk about very personal issues. They therefore chose not to engage or attend review meetings. Many carers felt review meetings did not sufficiently represent the child's wishes and feeling. Children and young people described varied practice in relation to contact with

the IRO to ascertain their wishes and feelings. Some young people did not know if they had a care and support plan, others said important elements of the plan were not taken forward.

Some foster carers described thoughtful social work practice, with time taken to build relationships with children and listen to children's views. Other foster carers described how social workers preparation for meetings was compacted in to the day before a meeting, thus this had a feeling of boxes being ticked and limited meaningful practice depth. Children's wishes and feelings are likely to be poorly represented when practice is pressed. One carer told us about a personal education plan not being in place a year after a child moved to live with her.

What children and young people said about meetings/reviews

“It feels like I am a bystander – I refuse to attend them”.

“...boring...”

“...intimidating...”

“Too many personal questions were asked”.

“...able to chair own reviews”

“...listened to...”

Partnerships

What we found

We found a significant improvement in the corporate appreciation of the challenges of children's social services but the burden of delivery against early intervention and corporate parenting functions often remained too limited to the activities and role of children's social services.

Whilst understood that reducing the need for social work led care and support from children's social services is dependent upon the ability of all council directorates and partners to work together, the extent to which this translated into tangible contributions or action to deliver improved early interventions and outcomes, for children looked after remained very variable.

We heard of good working relationships with partner agencies at an operational level. We saw a mixed picture of joint working with partner agencies at a strategic level with significant further development needed to secure, multi-agency partnership working and 'joined up practice' to ensure positive outcomes for children and families.

In some local authorities, the engagement of partners in the introduction of the 2014 Act, had not resulted in a shared understanding of threshold criteria and the referrals from partners were not of a consistently sufficient quality to enable social services to make early and well-informed decisions.

Local authorities recognised they had yet to embed the voices of children,

young people and their families when shaping service planning. This is essential if they are to understand the difference help, care and support and/or protection is making for children and families.

Partnership with health services

Local authorities reported 86% of plans included a timely health element and looked after children and young people's primary health needs were generally well supported by the looked after children nurse, and through the school nurse.

However, concerns continued regarding the poor availability of emotional and therapeutic support services particularly in relation to Community Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). This was despite the shared recognition that the majority of children who are in care for lengthy periods will have suffered adverse childhood experiences which impact on their emotional wellbeing. As a result many local authorities have developed their own in-house support services to help ensure children and young people could access timely help. This highlights deficits in partnership working and has a financial implication for children's services at a time of constricting budgets.

More work is needed urgently with health boards to develop a clear assessment of looked after children and care leavers' health needs including their mental health needs. This needs to inform clear access pathways to an appropriate range of services able to meet identified needs.

We identified good examples of appropriate challenge by the IROs where plans had not sufficiently progressed. In some examples however, the identified barriers resulted from known gaps in services for example children's emotional wellbeing services. There was significant frustration regarding the extent to which IROs felt able to influence partners' contribution to the agreed care and support plan. These issues need to continue to be escalated to senior managers and the corporate parenting board.

Issues were identified regarding the lack of a clear pathway for care leavers with ongoing health needs. Young people in need of therapeutic services were often poorly served.

Partnership with education services

Local authorities have continued to give attention to the educational achievement of looked after children. Most local authorities had invested in specialist staff within their educational directorates to promote the educational needs of looked after children. However, it was noted in some local authorities this had lost traction and vacancies in these posts were not always being replaced.

Performance in relation to personal education plans (PEPs) is poor and is an area for improvement with only 56% of plans including PEPs as an integral part as at 1 January 2018. This makes it difficult to assess whether children's educational needs are being met and it is therefore less obvious what should happen to ensure they are achieving in line with their peers.

There was not always a strong emphasis on aspiration and how children are encouraged by an overall supportive approach to learning. The need to reduce the number of looked after children and care leavers not in education, employment or training, has consistently been recognised as a priority. However, while ambitions are high, progress has been consistently too slow and local authorities as corporate parents need to do more.

Partnership with housing services

Most local authorities were working to strengthen the relationship between children and housing services. Some had developed young people's homelessness strategies and protocols for the assessment of 16 to 17 year olds. This was often in light of increased demand.

A number of local authorities had created an accommodation officer or link officer role, funded by Supporting People monies to improve the pathways into housing and the options available to young people.

Stronger working relationships with housing and local colleges were productive in gaining the additional level of support needed for some young people to succeed in living independently without any family support.

The number of care leaver's opportunities for work experience and council sponsored schemes vary significantly across Wales but are limited. It is a disappointment that the early success in sponsoring local authority work placements for care leavers is not being aligned to meet the predicted increase in numbers. Not all local authorities collected data regarding which scheme young people were working on. Some local

authorities did not have any sponsored schemes. The ability of some local authorities to meet the needs of care leavers was influenced by the quality of information sharing and a shared data profile of young people transitioning into leaving care. Also by the availability of appropriate accommodation in the localities where they wanted to live to maintain their relationships alongside education, training or employment networks.

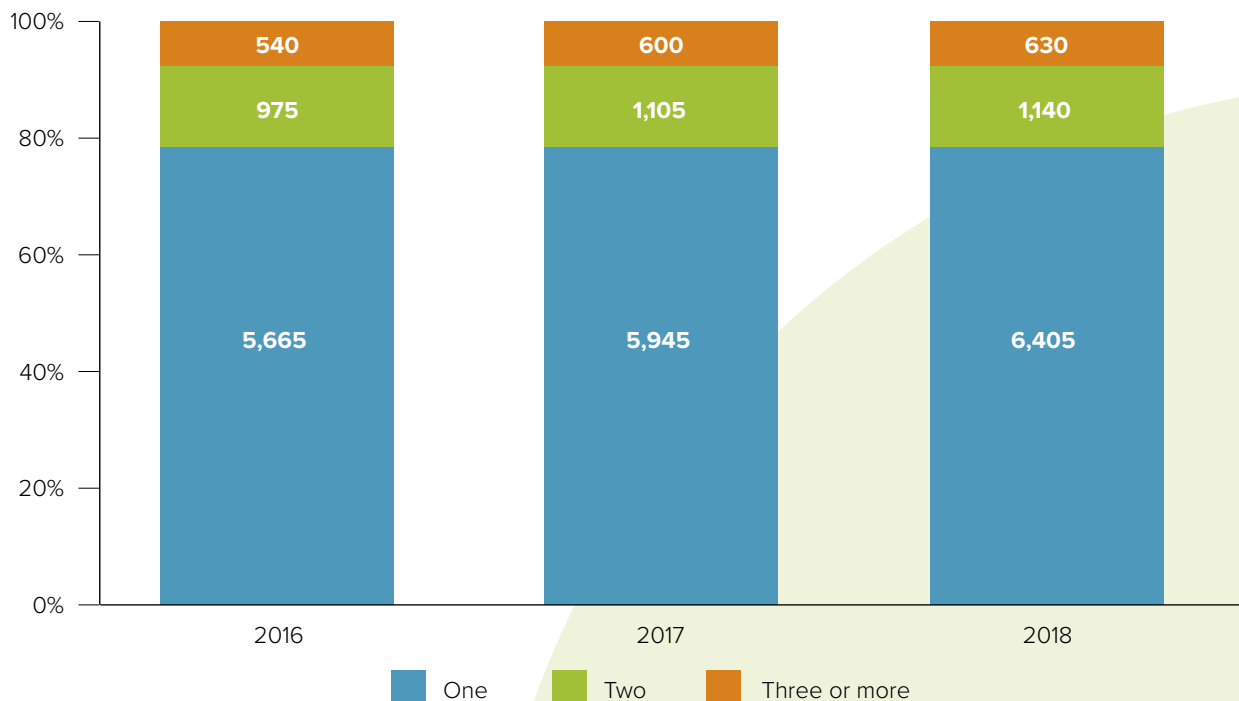
For example, whilst most local authorities had strengthened their homelessness strategies for young people these did not reflect a shared understanding of the projected growth in the number of care leavers potentially contributing to this.

Part 5:

Stability

What we know

Figure 5: Three year trend of looked after children by number of placements indicating limited variability



Source: <https://statswales.gov.wales>, Placements of children looked after by local authorities, at 31 March 2018

The self-evaluation profile illustrated:

- An increasing number of looked after children subject to a care order.
- The increased use of family-based care with 74% (4715) of children placed in foster care settings.
- A significant variance in the use of independent providers was reported across local authorities ranging from 2% to 47%.

The self-evaluation data reported a small overall number (43), of children placed in residential special schools. There were 18 children within secure units, where one child was under the age of 13. The percentage of children placed in registered children's homes was 5%, 327, with local authorities with their own registered homes having the highest numbers.

What we found

We found improved practice with most children now being seen more regularly by a social worker. Staff vacancies and workload demands in some authorities however, meant children and young people were not always seen by their allocated worker and some children and young people continued to experience too many changes. The quality of the relationship between children and young people with their social worker/personal advisor/support workers is key to ensuring a positive outcomes. Often children and young people suffer instability due to disruptions in these key relationships. Workforce pressure have a significant impact on ensuring each child and young person is able to establish a good quality trusting relationship with a social worker without disruptions.

Those local authorities reporting an increase in their use of independent provider placements identified this as resulting either from a growth in their numbers of looked after children population or due to the complexity of need. The use of independent fostering placements is generally more expensive than local authority foster placements.

Whilst the placement of children within their family networks had always been the starting point for local authorities the number of children and young people placed with connected carers or their parents had more than tripled. Increasing from 580 in 2014/15 to 2028 at 1 January 2018.

Local authorities identified that whilst the increased use of connected carers was positive, assessing and supporting such placements is more difficult to plan. The volume of the assessments and timescale pressures associated with court proceedings had impacted on the work loads of home finding teams.

Many local authorities reported connected carer assessment had reduced their capacity to recruit and undertake mainstream foster carer assessments. Support for connected carers is also essential and local authorities were trying to develop more bespoke training to meet their needs.

What children and carers told us

A young person reflected on his experience in foster care and the number of moves to different carers. In hindsight he wondered whether social workers could have worked through these difficulties with foster carers and whether the issues could have been resolved as he did not consider they were major issues. The placement moves resulted in a change of school and having to establish friendships once again.

Foster carers considered therapeutic support as critical to the stability of children living with them and where this was not available, this was a contributory factor in placement breakdown. Some foster carers were positive about the support they received from their local authority. They described this as timely and supportive, with access to out of

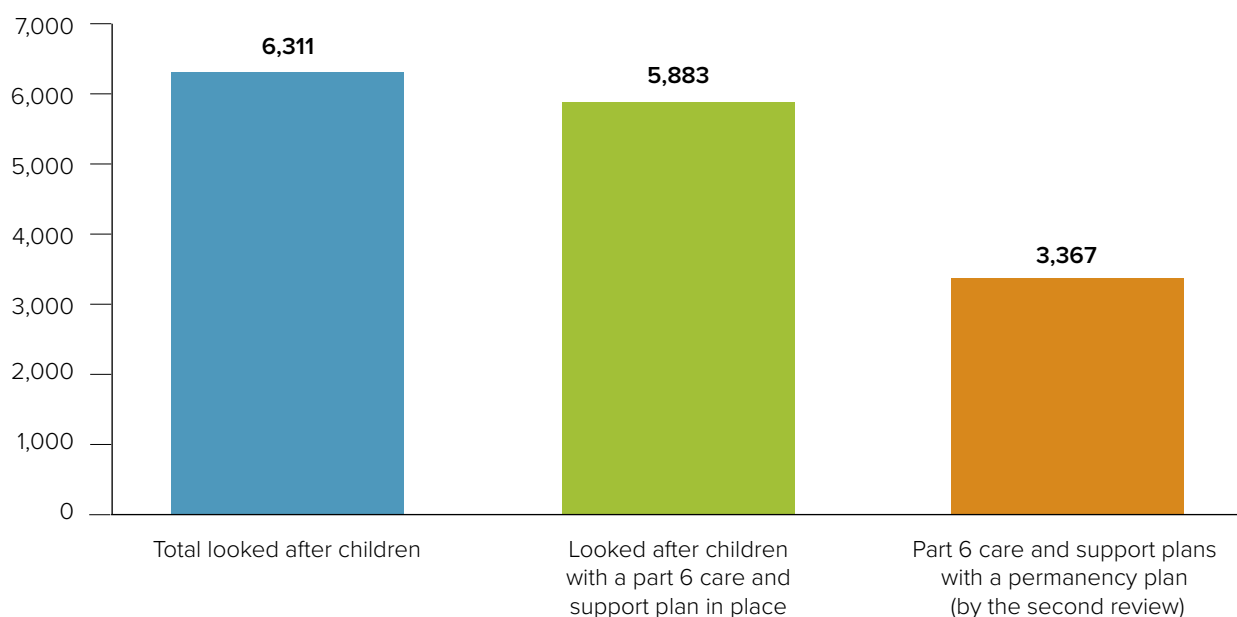
hours support, therapeutic social workers and 'edge of care' teams. Training was available to them, including safeguarding training. Some local authorities clearly provided thorough support for their

foster carers. This is critical to ensure the complex needs of vulnerable children are met, to avoid breakdown of arrangements and secure permanence for children and young people.

Permanency planning

What we know

Figure 6: Total looked after children permanency plan arrangements as at 1 January 2018



Source: Local authority self-evaluation data collection, 1 January 2018

As at 1 January 2018, 70% of children had a clear permanency plan in place by the child's four month review.

What we found

Children's services' including senior managers, social workers and IROs, viewed permanency for looked after children as a priority. When we spoke to social workers it was clear they had considered the full range of permanency options for children, including return home plans where appropriate. However, the rationale for their recommendations was not always well evidenced on the case file.

Local authorities had developed a range of systems so once a child became looked after their circumstances were reviewed by a panel or manager and all placement changes and services were ratified by these arrangements. Amongst pressures of placement shortages we found 28% of children experienced two or more moves (as at 31 March 2018).

Care proceedings were mainly timely and within the 26 week time frame set for completion; where delays had occurred, local authorities had sought to understand the causes to assist with future improvements.

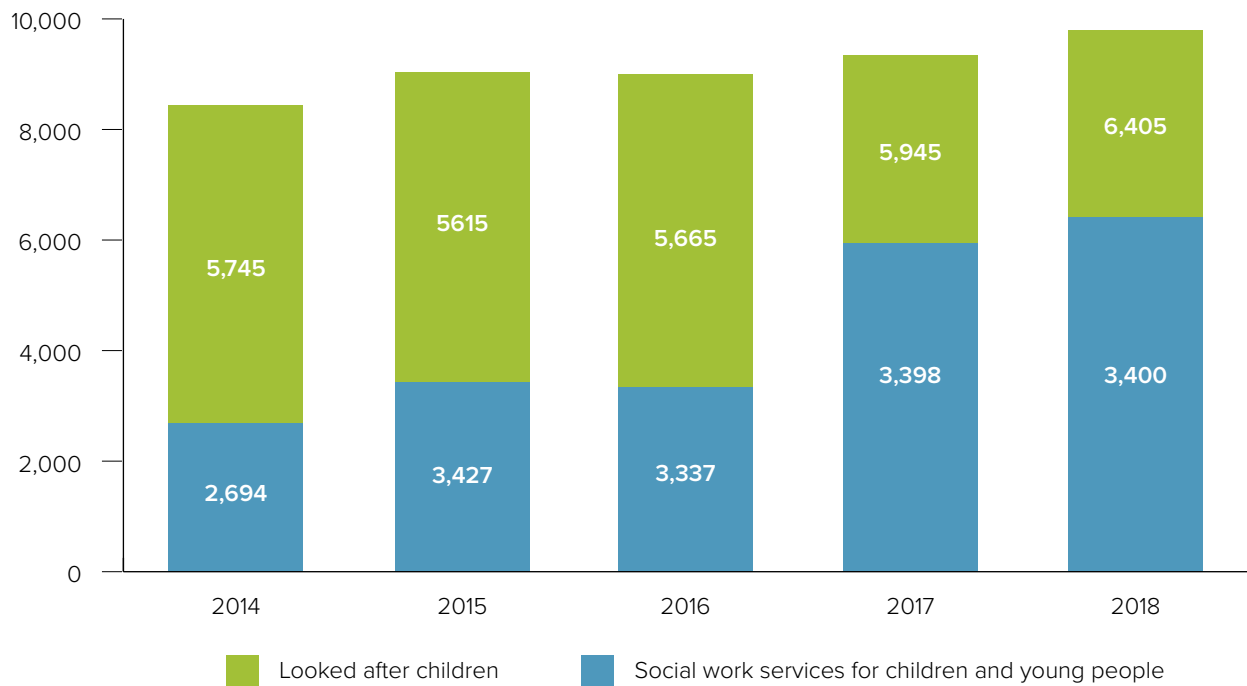
Local authorities are continuing to work hard to ensure children do not remain subject to unnecessary social work intervention. We found strong commitment to successfully returning children and young people home where it is in their best interests. There was some evidence of purposeful work to help families change and we saw some comprehensive parenting assessments undertaken to provide assurance that decisions were made safely. In other instances, the return home was less well planned and young people continued to 'vote with their feet'.

Information systems need to capture reliable data regarding those children who have further episodes of care to identify what worked well and what more could have been done. Whilst most local authorities had developed 'edge of care' services this needs to be matched by similar services for children who return home including those for whom care orders are discharged.

Stability of workforce

What we know

Figure 7: Social work whole time equivalent (WTE) staff for children and young people versus the total looked after children population 5 year trend



Source: <https://statswales.gov.wales>, Whole time equivalent staff of local authority social services departments (all years) & Children looked after by local authorities, by age and gender, at 31 March 2018

Table 3: Looked after children workforce consistency profile

Looked after children allocated to a social worker	97%
Looked after children who have had the same social worker for the last six months	61%
Looked after children who have experienced more than two changes of social worker in the last 6 months	13%
Care leavers with an allocated personal advisor	83%

NB: Percentages will not total to 100%

Source: Local authority self-evaluation data collection, 1 January 2018

Local authorities identified approximately 62% percent of looked after children had kept the same worker over six months but 15% had experienced two changes in worker in a six month period up to 1 January 2018.

What we found

We found the workforce was generally suitably qualified, skilled, and highly committed to improving outcomes for children and young people.

Workforce capacity continues to affect the consistency of support offered to some looked after children, young people and care leavers. Work pressures and service expectations have affected workers time for reflection and their opportunity to gain competence and confidence in their own abilities.

The turnover of staff and managers, often due to internal and external promotion, and the absence of staff due to maternity or sickness leave, means some teams experienced service pressures.

The use of agency staff has significantly decreased. Some local authorities continued to use small numbers of experienced agency workers to strengthen teams.

We identified improved practice with most children being seen more regularly by a social worker. Staff vacancies and workload demands in some local authorities however, meant children and young people were not always seen by their allocated worker and some children and young people continued to experience too many changes. Such changes in social workers and managers had contributed to a legacy of inconsistent care planning and missed opportunities to secure permanency earlier.

Local authorities were alive to workforce pressures with significant attention given to recruitment and increasingly to retention. Most had achieved progress in recruiting to social work posts however there remained an over reliance on newly

qualified workers and recruitment of experienced staff was identified as more of a challenge.

Some local authorities had experienced increasing difficulties in recruiting to front line manager posts and to more

senior officer posts. Many were now adopting a 'grow your own approach'. It was positive that this was increasingly accompanied by a training and mentoring program to support staff to transition into management roles.

What children and young people told us

The impact of the social worker relationship on a child's experience cannot be underestimated. Some children and young people made positive comments having a consistent social worker but the majority who spoke to us had encountered frequent changes in social workers.

"In care for 13 years and had about 30 social workers".

They'd had "7 (social workers) in 7 years" and felt this was a "massive issue".

A young person talked about difficulties in having to get used to someone else, and the delay whilst they (the new social worker) read their care file.

"That they had around 3 or 4 social workers within 1 ½ years".

Social workers, particularly those holding mixed caseloads, identified that by necessity, safeguarding and court cases continued to take priority. Young people recognised social workers had heavy caseloads, but had important messages for social workers to be respectful by returning telephone calls, listening to their views and being available.

Whilst we identified some care leavers experienced disruptions in their personal advisor arrangements, many reported good support from their personal assistant (PA). Most spoke very warmly about the

relationship they had and the valuable support they received. This enabled young people to make important changes less challenging. For example, moving to live independently and starting further education. Many young people described how their social worker had less time to give them and many changes of social workers affected young people's ability to participate and feel listened to.

Responses from carers, children and young people illustrated the widespread position and effect of social worker turnover and inadequate staffing.

What a young person told us

“When I first went into care, I was in a very bad place. I used to self-harm a lot. I never felt like I was judged or over reacting, or anything. I just had the best support. I got into drugs at one point too, and although they always told me it was no good and I should stop I was never judged. I’ve had so many ups and downs over the years, but it’s fair to say that xxx (social workers) have always stuck by me and have really changed my life. When I didn’t have family, they were always there to talk to. 16+ team are an amazing bunch. Couldn’t have asked for better. You guys made such an impact that I am now working as a care assistant, and hope to one day either progress to your line or work, or youth offending”.

Part 6:

Governance and Corporate parenting

Most local authorities had identified the safe reduction of children in care including the reduction in numbers of children placed out of authority as a priority and were directing resources to safe reduction strategies. Despite the attention given to this agenda, 'spikes' in numbers of children becoming looked after continued.

Strategic plans aimed at improving outcomes for children and young people need to be developed, owned and delivered by staff and partner agencies which involve participation with children to help shape effective plans.

Local authorities recognised they had yet to embed the voices of children and young people and their families when shaping service planning. This is essential if local authorities are to understand the difference help, care and support and/or protection is making for children and families.

Local authorities were rightly perturbed by the growing numbers of looked after children and it is positive they are increasingly developing systems to assure themselves children are supported to remain at home where safe to do so and thresholds for care are appropriately applied.

At the most strategic level, local authorities were able to articulate their commitment to a vision aimed at improving outcomes for people, including children looked after,

by promoting independence, preventing people from becoming vulnerable and reducing the need for more intensive statutory interventions.

Many local authorities, however, had yet to translate this commitment into clear strategic plans that provided direction, guided practice and established measurable expectations for the workforce; and provided a clear basis for binding partners into an operationally effective shared agenda.

Whilst local authorities were working hard to transform children's social services in the context of the 2014 Act, implementation was variable. Two years on from the introduction of the 2014 Act, some local authorities were still at an early stage of implementing key aspects of the 2014 Act while others were revising their arrangements, in light of operational learning and experience. Local authorities highlighted that this continued to require considerable investment of time and service capacity in the context of increasing resource pressures.

Members and corporate officers were generally well informed regarding their statutory accountabilities including in relation to safeguarding and corporate parenting. They voiced their commitment to improving outcomes for children and families by developing both early interventions and the quality of more intensive, social work led care and support. Leaders and managers were

open in citing base budget pressures as a significant driver for remodelling children's social services, reflecting an urgent awareness of the need to reduce the cost of children's services in the face of growing expectation and demand.

We found a significant improvement from previous inspections in corporate appreciation of the challenges of children's social services, however, the burden of delivery against early intervention and corporate parenting functions often remained too limited to the activities and role of children's social services rather than being understood as a wider corporate responsibility.

Thus the extent to which understanding that reducing the need for intensive care and support from children's social services is dependent upon the ability of all council directorates and partners to work together, translated into tangible contributions or action to deliver improved early interventions and outcomes remained very variable.

Similarly, the greater corporate understanding of the complexities entailed in the delivery of safe and effective children's services was not always matched by an appreciation of the significance of stable professional leadership.

It was evident there often remained an underlying perception, outside of children's services, that there is a 'right number' for looked after children. The growth in the number of children becoming looked after was therefore too often viewed as a social services failure, either of judgement or practice, rather than as the necessary consequence of the local authority and

children's services meeting its statutory responsibilities and duties.

The corporate expectation regarding the speed with which services could be safely reconfigured and realise savings, was not always realistic and the extent to which such strategies required sustained investment was underestimated.

Systematic quality assurance mechanisms are under developed in many local authority children's services. These should be developed to ensure support and services provided and commissioned for children and families are timely, of a good quality and are succeeding in delivering better outcomes.

Most local authorities were in the early stages of implementation of the Welsh Community Care and Information System (WCCIS). The expected benefits of the system were yet to be realised and the conversion to the new electronic system had created varying degrees of discontinuity and associated short-term data gaps. This has had a detrimental impact on performance management and quality assurance.

It was not always evident that the wider organisation fully credited the level of capacity and resource children's services routinely invest in understanding and robustly managing the risk of those children on the edge of care and the numbers both entering and leaving the care system.

Understanding the impact of service delivery is central to achieving improved outcomes for children young people and their families. While all local authorities were engaged in a variety of quality assurance activities most did not

have a well-embedded multi-agency framework that:

- routinely monitored the quality of service against shared service thresholds specifications and standards
- robustly challenged practice and thinking to promote learning and improvement
- provided direct support and feedback that enabled staff to 'get it right first time'
- captured feedback from children and families as well as those providing and commissioning services.

It is positive we found the importance and value of performance information to be well established in children services.

Local authorities had developed and embedded systems to capture and analyse performance data to support members; senior officers; managers and staff to have a relevant and accurate knowledge of compliance with their statutory responsibilities. These also supported oversight of children and young people in or potentially in need of care and specific and emergent safeguarding concerns.

Children's services had increasingly been providing a narrative analysis of the data for members and corporate officers, including anonymised 'case studies' to heighten awareness of the complexity of demands and risks being managed.

Local authorities highlighted the recent transition from the former national performance management framework and its replacement by the outcome measures introduced with the 2014 Act in 2016, had also adversely affected the reliability and range of the data collected.

Welsh Government had already recognised differences in the ways local authorities were recording their activity and were working with authorities to review the performance framework.

Safe reduction of care strategies

Those local authorities who had experienced an earlier increase in the number of children becoming looked after were further ahead in this work, but it was noted despite the attention given to this agenda, 'spikes' in numbers of children coming in to care continued.

The safe reduction of care strategies seen were contingent on:

- Reduction of children entering care through the development of early interventions.
- An increased attention on permanency, e.g. use of alternative orders such as Special Guardianship Orders, discharges of orders, a reduction of the amount of time children spend in care.

This included:

- Identifying and ensuring those children and young people who can return home do so with the support needed to reduce the risk of returning to care.
- For children unable to return home, this means, improving performance in relation to adoption; finding suitable alternative placements without delay and maintaining or returning children and young people from out of authority placements.
- Local authorities were increasingly targeting resources to support relevant direct work with children young people and their families, including for example, reshaping teams to create dedicated looked after children and care leaving

teams, pre-birth assessment teams. These developments were increasingly informed by use of performance information.

- Most had mechanisms to identify those children and young people where the revocation or change of order would be appropriate and where a child might be returned to the home authority. The drive to reduce the number of looked after children placed away from the home authority had resulted in local authorities working to change commissioning arrangements. For example, more local authorities were developing their relationships with external providers with the view of increasing provision in the locality, increasing their own in-house residential provision and working on a regional basis to develop provision for children with complex needs.

Corporate Parenting

All local authorities articulated their aspiration to promote good outcomes for care-experienced children and young people and the majority had a range of corporate parenting arrangements in place. Many local authorities were considering how to improve the effectiveness of their corporate parenting functions and were in the process of refreshing their arrangements and/or updating their corporate parenting strategy. In some local authorities the corporate parenting ethos was not sufficiently strong and they struggled to evidence how children and young people looked after were supported to socialise with peers and achieve positive outcomes.

The engagement of the wider local authority and partners in the corporate parenting agenda was inconsistent. Progress was dependent on the commitment of key lead officers, rather than reflecting an embedded shared corporate ambition for looked after children.

The effectiveness of a number of boards/panels had been impeded by organisational change and fluctuating membership. In these circumstances, boards found it difficult to develop and maintain momentum, and often became project driven, limiting the ability of the board to promote dynamic change.

All boards were provided with performance information, including safeguarding information. The best received analysis and reports from other key partners such as the health board or education. At times these reports reflected the wider priorities of the partner organisation rather than being driven by a corporate parenting agenda.

The ability of the boards/panels to maintain a comprehensive overview of the progress of children who are looked after and care leavers was variable. Corporate parenting arrangements were often not well sighted regarding the quality of their service provision, for example in respect of placement outcomes.

The direct engagement with children, young people and carers was highly valued but local authorities continued to wrestle with how to make this meaningful and representative.

Conclusion

We identified positive practice carried out by hard working and professional frontline staff and saw examples of clear leadership and direction. We also heard about children and young people for whom their experience of care was positive, but this was not the case for all children who were looked after for whom outcomes were poor.

Many of the areas we have identified for improvement are not new but there has yet to be sufficient traction in identifying and implementing sustainable solutions. Many of these are being considered by Welsh Government's Ministerial Advisory Group on improving outcomes for care experienced children and young people. We hope this report along with our allied report on outcomes for children living in care homes contributes to this work; we will also share our findings through a learning event being planned in partnership with Social Care Wales.

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