

David Howes
Director of Social Services
Swansea Council

Date: 19/06/2026

Dear Mr Howes,

Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) - Assurance Check of Swansea Council Children Services

This letter sets out the findings from our assurance check carried out between 16 and 19 March 2026. The purpose of the check was to review how effectively the local authority's social services are exercising their duties and functions in line with legislation.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 We carry out inspection activity in accordance with the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014, key lines of enquiry, and the quality standards in the *Code of Practice in relation to the performance and improvement of social services in Wales*. This helps us determine the effectiveness of local authorities in supporting, measuring and sustaining improvements for people.
- 1.2 We focused our key lines of enquiry on the four principles of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and have recorded our judgements and findings in line with these principles: People – Voice and Control; Prevention; Well-being; and Partnerships.

Our focus was on:

People - voice and control

How well is the local authority ensuring all people are equal partners who have voice, choice and control over their lives and are able to achieve what matters to them?

To what extent is the local authority ensuring effective leadership at all levels, supported by a stable and skilled workforce who are able to deliver high-quality outcomes for children?

Prevention

To what extent is the local authority ensuring the need for care and support is minimised, and the escalation of need is prevented whilst ensuring that the best possible outcomes for people are achieved?

Well-being

To what extent is the local authority ensuring that people are protected and safeguarded from abuse and neglect and any other types of harm?

To what extent is the local authority ensuring that its planning, commissioning and oversight arrangements provide sufficient, suitable and safe placements for children and that any alternative or emergency arrangements continue to deliver consistent, purposeful and well-coordinated care planning that meets each child's assessed needs?

Partnership

To what extent is the local authority able to assure themselves effective partnerships are in place to commission and deliver fully integrated, high quality, sustainable outcomes for people?

To what extent is the local authority ensuring there are multi-agency approaches in place to identify, engage, and safeguard young people at risk of or experiencing exploitation, with all agencies equipped to manage contextual risk and understand networks related to exploitation?

2. Terminology and Quantity Definitions

A glossary of terminology is contained in Appendix one and a table of quantity definitions in Appendix two.

3. Summary of Assurance Check

- 3.1 The local authority has a strong focus on children's lived experience and a clear commitment to relational and strengths-based practice. Practitioners, leaders and partners described a service that is reflective,

child-centred and committed to learning and improvement. This is underpinned by a values-driven culture where practitioners feel supported and motivated to do the right thing for children.

- 3.2 Leaders are visible and accessible, and professional curiosity and constructive challenge are encouraged. Multi-disciplinary reflective forums bring practitioners and partners together to share learning, test risk and strengthen decision-making.
- 3.3 A coherent practice framework supports consistency across children's services. The Signs of Safety approach is deeply embedded and is characterised by shared language and methods used by practitioners and partners, supporting balanced assessment, clear safety planning and meaningful involvement of families and networks, and strengthening shared understanding across agencies.
- 3.4 Participation and engagement with children, young people and families is embedded across the service, with evidence that views inform individual planning and service improvement.
- 3.5 Prevention and early intervention are supported by coordinated front-door arrangements and integrated pathways. The service has a multi-agency Single Point of Contact (SPOC) team which supports families to get the right support at the right time and to live happy, healthy, and safe lives.
- 3.6 Safeguarding practice is supported by well-established multi-agency arrangements. Strategy discussions and Section 47 enquiries are progressed in a timely way when thresholds are met, supported by coordinated information sharing and effective multi-agency forums, with strong day-to-day collaboration across internal teams.
- 3.7 Partnership arrangements for exploitation and risk outside the home are a clear strength. Partners describe accessible and responsive arrangements that support shared ownership of risk, coordinated action and effective professional challenge. This collective response to contextual risk strengthens confidence that safeguarding activity is coordinated across agencies.
- 3.8 The assurance check identified areas for improvement, linked to the timeliness of conference and review documentation and the routine use of chronologies to support cumulative analysis. Practitioners and partners describe inconsistency in how thresholds are applied as concerns develop, and placement sufficiency pressures continue to limit access to suitable registered placements.

4. Key Findings and Evidence

Key findings and some examples of evidence are presented below in line with the four principles of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014.

People - voice and control - we asked:

How well is the local authority ensuring all people are equal partners who have voice, choice and control over their lives and can achieve what matters to them?

To what extent is the local authority ensuring effective leadership at all levels, supported by a stable and skilled workforce who are able to deliver high-quality outcomes for children?

Strengths

- 4.1 The local authority has a clear and shared vision of doing '*what matters to make things better for children, young people and families.*' Practitioners describe a shared understanding of how this vision supports strategic plans and best practice. The service is organised around People, Prevention and Permanence, bringing together workforce and culture, early help and crisis prevention, and stability and permanence planning to support a whole-system focus on outcomes.
- 4.2 Relational, strengths-based practice is embedded across children's services. Practitioners and managers work to a shared approach that supports professional curiosity, reflective supervision and constructive challenge, promoting consistency in decision-making and keeping children's lived experiences central to planning.
- 4.3 Signs of Safety is embedded as a shared practice framework and provides a consistent practice language for families, practitioners, and partners. Practitioners balance strengths and worries, develop safety plans and review progress. The approach strengthens risk assessments and improves the participation of children and families in plans to keep their child(ren) safe. **This is positive practice.**
- 4.4 Leaders stay visible and accessible. Oversight arrangements keep leaders connected to frontline practice and help them respond to emerging issues in ways that support learning and improvement. Practitioner survey responses reinforce this, with 96% agreeing or strongly agreeing they feel well supported by managers.
- 4.5 The local authority builds reflective practice into supervision and uses it to support practitioners to reflect on practice and maintain safe decision-making. 93% of practitioners who responded to the CIW survey agree or strongly agree that supervision supports them to reflect on their practice.

- 4.6 Learning and development is strengthened through the Learning and Innovation Team, which coordinates practice guidance, performance insight and improvement activity across children's services. The local authority makes learning practical and accessible. For example, there is an A-Z practice guide which supports consistent practice.
- 4.7 Workforce stability remains a challenge in parts of the service. The local authority is addressing this through its clear Recruitment and Retention Strategy, which sets out a "grow our own" approach and structured routes for induction, development and progression. This includes the Academy model for newly qualified social workers and peer learning and reflective support that strengthens early confidence and helps practitioners develop safely in complex work, supporting continuity for children and families.
- 4.8 Practitioners show strong commitment to children and families and communicate with compassion, including in how they record children's circumstances. Practitioners sustain a child-centred focus in complex situations and maintain attention to children's identity, experiences and wellbeing. Leaders model and support this practice through accessible leadership and reflective forums that recognise the emotional demands of safeguarding work and provide a space for learning and resilience.
- 4.9 Practitioners capture children's views through consistent and creative direct work and use those views to shape assessments and plans. Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) play an active role in promoting and sustaining children's participation, including encouraging children to attend their reviews wherever possible and agreeing practical ways for children to contribute when attendance is not possible. Children receive child-friendly letters following reviews, and practitioners and Chairs prepare children to share views in ways that work for them. Practitioners use visual and creative tools and child-friendly communication to help children explain their experiences and understand plans. **This consistent and systematic focus on capturing and responding to children's views, and enabling children to participate in planning, is positive practice.**

Areas for Improvement

Leaders describe arrangements for quality assurance which combines performance oversight with qualitative review activity. However, these arrangements are not consistently visible within social care records. **The local authority should strengthen record keeping to better evidence that management oversight and audit activity is impacting practice and outcomes for people.**

- 4.10 The local authority's electronic case recording system does not consistently support efficient and practical recording. **The local authority plans to move to**

a new case management system; in the interim, it should strengthen mitigating arrangements so practitioners can record, retrieve and evidence key information consistently within social care records.

Prevention - We asked:

To what extent is the local authority ensuring the need for care and support is minimised, and the escalation of need is prevented whilst ensuring that the best possible outcomes for people are achieved?

Strengths

- 4.11 Prevention is a clear strategic priority and the local authority transformation programme has aligned early help, crisis prevention and targeted services into coherent pathways. This ensures families receive advice, guidance and support earlier and statutory interventions reduce where it is safe to do so.
- 4.12 The SPOC screens and routes contacts to the right response, including information, advice and assistance, early help, statutory assessment and safeguarding pathways. This ensures consistent and timely decision-making, with 98% of decisions being made within one working day.
- 4.13 Early help and prevention services provides a timely range of targeted interventions that support earlier engagement and reduce escalation where it is safe to do so. This includes interventions with pre-birth risk, parenting and family change, substance use and domestic abuse. There is also a wrap-around model that brings together social work, family support and therapeutic input. **This is positive practice.**
- 4.14 The local authority embeds a trauma-informed approach in prevention work. Practitioners recognise how adversity can shape children's and parents' behaviour and respond in ways that reduce shame and support engagement. This approach is reflected in the tone and language of assessments, which remain compassionate and non-judgemental, and it supports relationship-based intervention that helps families sustain change.
- 4.15 The local authority uses life-story and identity-focused work to help care-experienced children understand their history and maintain a coherent sense of self. Social care records include life-story books and letters, alongside memory boxes and later life letters, and practitioners update this work as children grow so it remains relevant and supports emotional wellbeing.
- 4.16 The local authority maintains engagement through family-led support that relies on agreement and shared purpose, setting out proportionate responses that keep children within their families where this is safe. Practitioners develop plans

with families around clear outcomes, monitor progress routinely and mostly adjust help quickly as circumstances change.

- 4.17 The local authority is developing its therapeutic offer as part of a wider whole-service approach, including investment in an in-house therapeutic team that supports trauma-informed practice across children's services. Therapeutic input complements social work practice with parents and children, including supporting services to work more therapeutically with parents and take a more emotionally attuned approach during family time. This developing offer also increases practitioners' access to consultation and guidance, supporting more reflective and relational responses to complexity.
- 4.18 Born into Care and the JIG-SO pathway strengthen early intervention for unborn babies. They provide early, intensive and sustained antenatal and post-natal support that brings together specialist midwifery and parenting interventions alongside statutory services. JIG-SO involvement begins early in pregnancy and continues after birth, with coordinated visiting and active participation in child protection processes, resulting in risks being managed through high-intensity support, monitoring and capacity-building. **This is positive practice which ensures a solution focus and strength-based approach to working with unborn and newborn children.**
- 4.19 The Domestic Abuse Hub provides a whole-family response that supports coordinated multi-agency planning and delivers targeted domestic abuse interventions. This multifaceted response to domestic abuse is **positive practice** which ensures timely, proportionate, and specialist responses to need.

Areas for Improvement

- 4.20 Step-up to statutory intervention and step-down to universal or preventative support are generally applied appropriately, and most children receive a response proportionate to risk and need. We identified a few social care records where escalation was not timely as risk built over time. **The local authority should strengthen consistent re-testing of thresholds as cumulative harm develops so step-up decisions are timely and children receive the right level of protection at the right time.**
- 4.21 Chronology information is not consistently visible or used as an analytical tool to support a clear shared understanding of what has happened over time, including understanding cumulative harm, particularly when cases move between teams or workers. **The local authority should strengthen how chronology information is recorded and presented so it can routinely inform assessment, planning and decision-making.**

Wellbeing – We asked

To what extent is the local authority ensuring that people are protected and safeguarded from abuse and neglect and any other types of harm?

To what extent is the local authority ensuring that its planning, commissioning and oversight arrangements provide sufficient, suitable and safe placements for children and that any alternative or emergency arrangements continue to deliver consistent, purposeful and well-coordinated care planning that meets each child's assessed needs?

Strengths

- 4.22 The local authority demonstrates a clear and well-established safeguarding culture, with active and effective multi-agency engagement in key safeguarding forums. Practitioners and partners describe mostly timely information sharing and coordinated responses to risk, supporting shared ownership and defensible decision-making. Leaders maintain oversight of safeguarding activity and set clear expectations that promote professional confidence and proportionate responses. This is reflected in practitioners survey feedback, with 98% of respondents agreeing safeguarding practice is effective.
- 4.23 Safety plans are balanced and purposeful, clearly setting out risks and strengths. These are developed collaboratively with parents, carers and wider networks. Plans draw on extended family and community support and are written in plain, accessible language, enabling children and those around them to understand what needs to happen to keep them safe. This **positive practice** supports proportionate approaches to risk management and contingency planning.
- 4.24 Child Protection Conferences and Children Looked After Reviews are mostly timely and consistently attended by the relevant partner agencies, with a clear focus on promoting the safety and well-being of children. Most children attend their reviews and are supported to participate in ways that are appropriate to their age and understanding, including through preparation with Chairs ahead of conferences and reviews. Children receive child-friendly letters following reviews that clearly explain decisions and next steps. Parents and carers, and where appropriate children, are offered opportunities to share their views directly with Conference Chairs, and it is positive that the number of children attending their reviews continues to increase. Overall, families are supported through child protection processes with a balance of openness, humanity and active partnership.
- 4.25 Practitioners respond to safeguarding referrals in line with the requirements of the Wales Safeguarding Procedures. Decision-making is supported by timely information sharing and effective multi-agency engagement. Risks are identified, assessed and acted upon without unnecessary delay. Clear actions, ownership and timescales are set at the point of escalation, and arrangements

are adjusted as circumstances change to maintain a focus on children's safety and well-being.

- 4.26 A dedicated Contextual, Missing, Exploited and Trafficked (CMET) team provides oversight and coordination for risk outside the home. Defined pathways support timely safeguarding action when children are at risk of exploitation, go missing or face wider contextual risk, including use of strategy discussions, Section 47 enquiries and risk-outside-the-home approaches where significant harm is identified beyond the family environment. This provides assurance that safeguarding responses are timely and remain focused on children's safety and well-being.
- 4.27 The local authority has experienced unpredictable pressures arising from unannounced placements of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) by other local authorities, where young people have arrived without prior notification or consultation. This increases safeguarding demand, including missing episodes and related contextual risk. The local authority's response remains child-centred and agile. Where required, young people are integrated promptly into UASC and exploitation pathways so safeguarding and well-being needs are addressed at the earliest opportunity. This provides assurance that children receive a timely safeguarding response despite complex, externally driven pressures.

Areas for Improvement

- 4.28 Placement sufficiency pressures mean some children receive accommodation together with care in unregistered care home service arrangements, contrary to the registration requirement under the Regulation and Inspection of Social Care (Wales) Act 2016. Placement sufficiency is a recognised system pressure and is identified as a significant issue across the wider landscape of children's services. Governance and oversight for placement decision-making is clear, with defined senior authorisation and regular review where exceptional arrangements arise. Planning keeps emergency and alternative arrangements focused and time-limited, with active oversight and move-on planning to support transition into regulated provision. During the assurance check, CIW saw evidence of a child-focused approach to stabilising placements and managing risk where no suitable registered placement was immediately available, alongside a consistent focus on securing regulated provision at the earliest opportunity. **The local authority must ensure that children receiving care are placed in registered services and should continue to strengthen its ability to identify and secure appropriate, registered placements, including progressing registration and timely transition where exceptional unregistered arrangements arise.**
- 4.29 Conference and review documentation is not consistently shared within expected timescales. This includes the late provision of conference reports to parents, sometimes too close to the meeting to support effective preparation.

The local authority must ensure that information is shared in line with the requirements of the Wales Safeguarding Procedures.

- 4.30 Partner agencies report that feedback following duty to report safeguarding concerns is not always timely or consistent. **The local authority must strengthen arrangements for providing timely and proportionate feedback to partner agencies following duty to report notifications.**

Partnership – We asked:

To what extent is the local authority able to assure themselves effective partnerships are in place to commission and deliver fully integrated, high quality, sustainable outcomes for people?

To what extent is the local authority ensuring there are multi-agency approaches in place to identify, engage, and safeguard young people at risk of or experiencing exploitation, with all agencies equipped to manage contextual risk and understand networks related to exploitation?

Strengths

- 4.31 Integrated partnership working is an established feature of the service. Internal teams coordinate timely information sharing and joined-up decision-making. Across the wider partnership, police, health and education colleagues contribute to planning and ensure concerns are identified and responded to quickly.
- 4.32 Participation is a clear and established feature of the service, with children's views influencing planning, reviews and service development through a range of practice-based and service-led approaches. The local authority's Participation Strategy provides a shared framework that brings this activity together, making clear how children's views will shape decisions, how feedback will be given, and what consistent practice looks like across teams. This supports a coherent approach to participation, ensuring children's involvement is purposeful and linked to decision-making rather than standing alone as engagement activity.
- 4.33 Partnership working with parents is a defining feature of the Reflect service, which supports respectful, collaborative planning where children cannot remain in their parents' care. Reflect provides a structured space for parents to engage with professionals, understand decisions and contribute meaningfully to planning, while maintaining a clear focus on the child's needs and timescales. Reflect involvement can continue beyond pre-birth contexts and can support parents towards the end of proceedings, including through links with family time services, helping parents to remain engaged during highly sensitive decision-making. **This is positive practice.**

- 4.34 The local authority works in close partnership with health services through its Born into Care approach. Health, midwifery and social care practitioners work within shared arrangements that support joint assessment, information sharing and coordinated planning from an early stage. These partnership arrangements promote shared accountability, continuity of professional involvement and clear collective oversight, ensuring that decision-making is informed by a full understanding of health, developmental and safeguarding considerations. This provides assurance that pre-birth work is shaped and owned jointly across agencies, rather than led by a single service. **This is positive practice.**
- 4.35 The local authority's approach to exploitation and contextual safeguarding is underpinned by strong strategic partnership working. Agencies share a common understanding that risk outside the home requires a collective response, with responsibility held across the system rather than resting with individual services. Partnership arrangements support shared prioritisation of contextual risk, alignment of roles and clarity about how agencies contribute to prevention, disruption and safeguarding activity. This strengthens system-wide oversight of extrafamilial harm and supports coherent responses to emerging patterns of risk.
- 4.36 At an operational level, partners work together to respond to contextual risk through coordinated, place-based and network-focused activity. Agencies align their actions across enforcement, disruption, support and engagement, recognising that reducing harm requires joint intervention across community settings as well as individual plans. This collaborative approach enables partners to act quickly as risk shifts, maintain continuity of response and avoid fragmented or duplicative activity. As a result, responses to exploitation and risk outside the home are grounded in shared action and collective responsibility. **This is positive practice.**
- 4.37 Professional challenge is welcomed and used to strengthen practice. The local authority promotes a strong learning culture through regular multi-disciplinary reflective forums, where practitioners and partners explore complex situations together. These sessions support constructive challenge, shared understanding of risk and deeper insight into children's experience. As a result, decision-making is strengthened and safety planning is informed by a broad range of professional perspectives.

5 Next Steps

CIW expects the local authority to consider the areas identified for improvement and take appropriate action to address and improve these areas. CIW will monitor progress through its ongoing performance review activity with the local authority. Where relevant we expect the local authority to share the positive practice identified with other local authorities, to disseminate learning and help drive continuous improvement in statutory services throughout Wales.

6 Methodology

Fieldwork

- Most inspection evidence was gathered by reviewing the experiences of 25 children through review and tracking of their social care record. We reviewed 21 social care records and tracked four.
- Tracking a child's social care record includes having conversations with the child in receipt of social care services, and/or their family or carers, key worker, the key worker's manager, and where appropriate other professionals involved.
- We engaged, through interviews and meetings with four children and young people and five parents and/or foster carers.
- We engaged, through interviews with 44 local authority employees (this included Head of Service, Principal Officers, Social Workers, Team Managers and IRO's).
- We engaged through focus groups with 15 representatives of partner organisations (this included police, health, third sector and education).
- We observed the CMET panel, weekly safeguarding meeting and supported care planning peer supervision session.
- We attended Info-Nation a multi-agency information and advice service for young people aged 11–25 and visited the Blemmyes resource centre and met with the family connect team and Reflect worker.
- We reviewed supporting documentation sent to CIW for the purpose of the inspection.
- We administered surveys to local authority social services practitioners, partner organisations and people. We received responses from 41 people (children, young people and their parents or carers), from 79 representatives of partner agencies and 160 practitioners employed by the local authority.

Our Privacy Notice can be found at <https://careinspectorate.wales/how-we-useyour-information>.

7 Welsh Language

CIW is committed to providing an active offer of the Welsh language during its activity with local authorities.

The active offer not required on this occasion. This is because the local authority informed us that people taking part did not wish to contribute to this assurance check in Welsh.

8 Acknowledgements

CIW would like to thank staff, partners and people who gave their time and contributed to this inspection.

Yours sincerely,



Lou Bushell-Bauers
Head of Local Authority Inspection
Care Inspectorate Wales

Appendix 1

Glossary of Terminology

Term	What we mean in our reports and letters
Must	Improvement is deemed necessary in order for the local authority to meet a duty outlined in legislation, regulation or code of practice. The local authority is not currently meeting its statutory duty/duties and must take action.
Should	Improvement will enhance service provision and/or outcomes for people and/or their carer. It does not constitute a failure to meet a legal duty at this time; but without suitable action, there is a risk the local authority may fail to meet its legal duty/duties in future.
Positive practice	Identified areas of strength within the local authority. This relates to practice considered innovative and/or which consistently results in positive outcomes for people receiving statutory services.
Voice and Control	A principle of the Act which aims to put the individual and their needs at the centre of their care and support, and giving them a voice in, and control over, the outcomes that can help them achieve well-being and the things that matter most to them.
Prevention and Early Intervention	A principle of the Act which aims to ensure that there is access to support to prevent situations from getting worse, and to enhance the maintenance of individual and collective well-being. This principle centres on increasing preventative services within communities to minimise the escalation of critical need.

Well-being	A principle of the Act which aims for people to have wellbeing in every part of their lives. Well-being is more than being healthy. It is about being safe and happy, having choice and getting the right support, being part of a strong community, having friends and relationships that are good for you, and having hobbies, work or learning. It is about supporting people to achieve their own well-being and measuring the success of care and support.
Co-Production	A principle of the Act which aims for people to be more involved in the design and provision of their care and support. It means organisations and professionals working with them and their family, friends and carers so their care and support is the best it can be.
Multi-agency working	A principle of the Act which aims to strengthen joint working between care and support organisations to make sure the right types of support and services are available in local communities to meet people's needs. The summation of the Act states that there is a requirement for co-operation and partnership by public authorities.
What matters	'What Matters' conversations are a way for professionals to understand people's situation, their current well-being, and what can be done to support them. It is an equal conversation and is important to help ensure the voice of the individual or carer is heard and 'what matters' to them

Appendix 2

Quantity Definitions Table

Terminology	Definition
Nearly all	With very few exceptions
Most	90% or more
Many	70% or more
A majority	Over 60%
Half	50%
Around half	Close to 50%
A minority	Below 40%
Few	Below 20%
Very few	Less than 10%