

# Children's Services Overview

## Introduction

This is Monmouthshire's second Children's Social Services overview report. Its purpose is to give an accurate and honest appraisal of current services in Monmouthshire and outline the priorities for improvement over the next year or so.

The comments and judgements in the report are based on a number of sources of information including hard statistical information, feedback from service users and feedback from other agencies. Our aim is to present an accurate picture reflecting the things we have done well over the last year and the things we need to improve.

We have given consideration to the core areas of work and activity we have undertaken and have structured the report in two ways. There are chapters covering general issues common to all groups (i.e. access, assessment and care management and safeguarding) and then chapters for each service-user group (eg children with disabilities, children looked after). By doing this we have sought to minimise duplication; even so, there are inevitably overlaps within the report.

One of the most important aspects of the report is our "judgement". Each section starts by summarising how we think we are doing and indicates our priorities over the next year, our position is supported by evidence collated in service area grids which indicates these points in more detail.

In summary then, how are we doing in Children's Social Services in Monmouthshire? My view, as Head of Service, is that our services are mainly good, but with some areas requiring improvement. The department has worked hard to improve services over the last year and has made significant progress. There are a number of developments that have taken place over the last year that have contributed to the departments improvement agenda including –

- The centralisation of our referral and assessment functions and increased consistency at our front.
- Improved management information for individual teams.
- The recruitment of a permanent social work tier and the recruitment of two new permanent team managers.
- Improved financial management evident by the Service operating within the parameters of available funding.
- A reduction in our use of externally provided independent foster placements.

We have however experienced a number of difficulties and challenges over the last year including –

- The ongoing implementation of the new electronic data collection and recording system known as the Integrated Children's System (ICS). This has been introduced in stages and required social workers to learn a new way of recording their work with children and families. We have seen the implementation of this system for the recording of our child protection this year.
- A period of limited management of our fostering service and a resultant lack of recruitment of in-house foster carers.

- An increase in the volume of work we have experienced.

These are my views and we would like to hear what you think. In particular, are we describing the Monmouthshire social services that you know from your experience?

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**Head of Service**

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### Service Context

In order to consider the key aspects of Children's Social Services, it is important to briefly summarise the current structure and context of the Service.

Children's Social Services provides a range of services to children, young people and their families within Monmouthshire. The county covers a large geographical region and is predominantly rural in nature; this brings certain challenges to providing consistent service delivery and provision. All our service functions and provision are now delivered on a county wide basis from one location these include separate teams covering Referral and Assessment, longer term support, children with disability (CWD), looked after children and care leavers (Through Care Team), fostering (Child Placement Team), adoption (Adoption Team) and young offenders (Youth Offending Service). We have a number of specialist roles including the Safeguarding Principal Officer, the Independent Reviewing Officer, and the Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) Business Officer.

We work collaboratively with other local authorities and host a joint Monmouthshire / Torfaen Adoption Service and Youth Offending Team. We also work in partnership with other departments, agencies and organisations. A number of our support services are currently commissioned from the third sector (Action for Children), this includes family group conferencing, family support, advocacy, personal advisors and disability support (including short breaks).

### Getting Help - Access, Assessment and Care Management

This first section of the report picks up the process issues around access, assessment, and care planning common across the service user groups.

A key issue for us is making it easy for children and families to access our services. We noted last year that we needed to improve this within Monmouthshire by improving our links with the County's One Stop Shops. We have made progress in this area and our children and families in need of financial assistance are able to access this via our One Stop Shops. Over the next year we intend to enhance our links and use of the One Stop Shops further.

During this last year we have reconfigured two of our teams in order that we now have a centralised referral and assessment team and a longer term support team in order to improve our responsiveness. We have continued to support staff to have more flexibility in their working day by providing opportunities for agile working, enabling staff to record assessments more promptly, thus reducing the impact of travelling time between offices and home visits. Service users are able to access the Emergency Duty Team outside of normal working hours.

We produce a wide range of public information which is available via our offices and on our website. Last year we noted that we had more to do to ensure that new users can access the information they want, this year we have developed information packs for families given out during our introductory visits. Our service user feedback indicated 75% found that it was easy to get in touch with us, however only 35% had, had any prior public information about our services.

Over the last year we have strengthened our support to other agencies who provide earlier intervention to families, for example we now attend regularly, multi-agency meetings held by the secondary schools in the county.

We aim to consider all new referrals or requests for support within one working day. This is an area we have maintained the improvements we made the last year.

	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
The percentage of referrals during the year on which a decision was made within one working day	74.1	97.2	98.1

(Source: SCC/006)

It is important to also acknowledge that the volume of referrals into the Service has increased this year, 428 referrals were received in 2007/08, 471 in 2008/09, 739 in 2009/10 and this year we have already received 1343. Changing how we manage and record information from other agencies and increasing our accessibility to children and families within the County may have contributed to this increased volume. This increased volume requires us to revisit how we manage information and requires us to ensure case loads remain manageable and that intervention remains purposeful and focused. An area of concern linking to this increase this year is that we have continued to experience increases in the number of re-referrals and also the number of unallocated cases. It was necessary to identify some additional temporary staff hours to address these unallocated cases.

A central role for social services is assessing children's needs, working with them to put in place appropriate support and reviewing this on a regular basis. We do this through following the Framework for Assessment guidance; this indicates specific timescales for both our initial assessments and more detailed core assessments. Over the last year we have successfully implemented an evaluation form to seek the views of parents and carers in relation to their experience of the assessments we have undertaken. Preliminary results from this evaluation indicate that 95% of parents/carers felt that staff members were clear about the purpose of their visit and were courteous, sensitive and understanding. Also 90% of service users were satisfied with their child's assessment and 75% considered the views of their child were taken into account. In the last year, we have made significant progress in the timeliness of these assessments. Centralising the assessment function within one team has improved the consistency in this area and workers have an increased understanding and focus on the importance of timeliness in our assessment work.

A measure of our success is that despite reorganising and moving offices we have maintained the timeliness of completing initial assessments above our target of 70%.

	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
The Percentage of Initial Assessments carried out within 7 working days.	66.7	74.8	76.4%

(Source: SCC/042)

Our timeliness in respect of our more detailed core assessments continues to be an area that we need to improve, in 2008/09 we completed 42.9% within the statutory timescale, this rose to 53.9% in 2009/10. However in 2010/11 we have only achieved 58.1% on time.

Last year we noted the need to increase the number of these assessments undertaken, this year we have managed to achieve undertaking over twice as many.

We have successfully improved the management oversight and quality assurance of referrals and assessments e.g. managers are more clearly tracking and checking assessments electronically. We have also implemented a new training course for staff in 'assessment work' to assist in improving the quality of our assessments particularly in relation to the analysis of information and enhancing the multi-agency aspect of these assessments. We continue to need to improve the use of chronologies and historical information in our assessment work.

Further to assessment, a child considered to be in need may be eligible for ongoing support. If this support is provided by Social Services and ongoing, we will formulate a care plan. We continue to need to ensure that all children we are working with post assessment have a relevant care plan. We aim to ensure that all children's plans are reviewed in accordance with statutory timescales; we can demonstrate effectiveness in this area if the child is looked after or subject to child protection processes and this year we have improved this only marginally for children in need, 72.2% of care plans being reviewed on time.

Wherever it is possible we support children to live within their family, each of the team's has a support worker who can provide task-orientated support. We also commission further family support from Action for Children, namely family group conferences and parenting support and assessment. Some of these services are provided from our family centre in the north of the County.

During 2010/11 we faced tight financial constraints and have had to plan for these pressures to increase over future years. We continue to offer services to children and families whose needs are greatest. Last year we had established strict financial management processes including the use of a fortnightly resource panel. Over the last year this panel has expanded to consider prioritisation of parenting support provided by Action for Children on our behalf, psychological support and internal transfer of work. Next year we will be expanding the role of the panel to include domiciliary care requests. The increased financial management has brought evidenced improvement over the last year and we have provided services successfully during 2010/11 within the budgets we have.

Last year we reported problems in the recruitment of social workers and team managers, this year we have made significant progress in this area, and have recruited permanently to all our social work posts, we are just recruiting to a senior practitioner post and have two manager posts to address in the coming year. Our staff turnover rate has improved from 28.38% in 2009/10 to 5.4% in 2010/11 (this includes our sessional staff).

### **Judgement**

We are proud of the progress we have made in improving our referral and assessment functions in particular our team reconfiguration, our performance measurement and staff turnover. However, we continue to need to improve the timeliness and volume of our core assessments. We also need to improve our office accessibility and reduce our re-referral rate.

Requires significant improvement	Inconsistent	Mainly good with some gaps	Well established and effective across the board
		✓	

### **Priorities for action**

- Continue to improve the links that Children's Social Services have with the County's One Stop Shops
- Improve our service public information.
- Reduce our re-referral rate
- Improve the timeliness of our core assessments.
- Continue to improve the management oversight and auditing of assessments
- Recruit two permanent team managers

### **Safeguarding**

The areas already indicated in the earlier Access, Assessment and Care Management section apply to this section, particularly in relation the timeliness of referral decisions and assessments. In 2009/10, 83.4%% of our initial child protection conferences were held within statutory timescales, this year we have worked to improve this and 98.8% were held on time. In 2009/10, 78.6% of our initial core group meetings were held on time and in 2010/11 this had risen to 98.2%, this figure is above the target we set for this year.

In 2009/10 our child protection review meetings were held within statutory timescales in 94.7% of cases, this year 100% were held on time. We have continued to struggle to implement new data and reporting systems within ICS for our child protection. There are comprehensive arrangements in place for legal advice outside of core office hours.

We started the year in April 2010 with 48 children on the child protection register; this figure rose to 62 by March 2011. All families attending initial child protection conferences receive a feedback questionnaire and children over the age of 10 are routinely invited to attend meetings.

*'Thank you for the opportunity to better myself as a person and a parent.....'*

We are aware that the timeliness of sharing our social work reports for child protection meetings with parents and children needs to improve in order to enable parents to feel more prepared and have more time to consider their views. Children and young people also have the option of using our commissioned independent advocacy service to enable them to participate in these meetings and decisions made.

Sadly during the last year we have had to contribute to a Serious Case Review following the tragic death of a young child in our area. This review will be concluded next year and



we will ensure we implement any recommendations, our own preliminary review has indicated a need to improve the information checks that take place when referrals are taken by us and also to continue to improve our quality assurance mechanisms that ensure we follow statutory guidance.

All children who are on the Child Protection Register have continued to have an allocated qualified social worker. We have an experienced principal Safeguarding Officer who chairs our Child Protection Meetings; this officer also chairs the South East Wales Inter

*'We were lucky to have a kind, understanding and friendly social worker'*

Agency Child Protection Forum. There is a comprehensive four tier training programme in relation to child protection coordinated by the Local Safeguarding Children Board. Our principal safeguarding Officer also provides additional specific

training on occasion, for example he was complemented this year for training he provided to the Welsh Care Council staff. We try to ensure our newly qualified staff have protected caseloads and effective mentoring arrangements, however over the last year we have seen our caseloads increase and will need to consider this further next year.

Over the last year we have continued to work on improving our quality assurance methods and processes – implementing increased audit arrangements and improving our management information reports. We have continued to implement mandatory supervision skills in child protection training for our managers and senior practitioners and introduced mandatory recording and assessment training. As mentioned earlier we have also enhanced and expanded our service user feedback mechanisms, also in conjunction with elected members and the Children and Young People's partnership a survey was undertaken of children and young people's views in regard to how safe they felt within their communities.

*'I have learnt about keeping safe and that it's ok to feel upset'*

The LSCB has a performance sub group and we are members of a collaborative practice improvement group. However this year we have had to manage for some of the time without the Business Manager for the LSCB. We have a clear strategic framework highlighting four areas namely – preventing and reducing harm, protecting through good practice, safeguarding through listening and working together better and two key areas of priority – children from 0 to 3 years and young people who are at risk. The Board has undertaken a self assessment exercise this year and integrated the information gained into it's action plan. Further consideration will be given to any opportunities for regional collaboration and LSCB's may be subject to national change.

As noted last year we have well established partnership arrangements that assist joint working, with good attendance of partner agency staff at strategy meetings, case conferences and reviews. Over the last year we have managed to establish regular liaison with our police colleagues, we have also been able to change our commissioned services from Women's Aid to ensure the children who are considered to be at risk in the County because of domestic abuse receive a service to offer them help and support. This has been particularly successful and we are receiving support from Cardiff University in our evaluation of this.

There continues to be good corporate and political support for safeguarding children with effective scrutiny arrangements. The Lead member for children and young people attends the monthly managers meeting, meets regularly with the Head of Children's Social Services and visits the Referral and Assessment Team periodically. As mentioned in the

previous section we have taken steps to address the recruitment of staff, we hope to have established an open advert on our website to assist with ensuring we maintain this improvement. During the last year a Community Care magazine survey noted that Monmouthshire was the most attractive welsh authority where people wanted to work, it is hoped that such public endorsement will assist with ongoing recruitment. We also need to take steps to improve the induction process for new staff in the service.

*'I use to think it was my fault when I was younger, I feel better now'*

### **Judgement**

In summary we consider our safeguarding arrangements are adequate and we are pleased with the improvements we have made over the last year

Requires significant improvement	Inconsistent	Mainly good with some gaps	Well established and effective across the board
		✓	

### **Priorities for action**

- Improve the timeliness of the sharing of our social work child protection reports with parents and children
- Continue to improve the recruitment and retention of staff, namely managers and reduce staff turnover rate.
- Continue to improve the audit arrangements within the Service
- To develop the quality assurance role of the LSCB and utilise opportunities for collaborative working.
- Implement any recommendations highlighted within the Serious Case Review.
- Review and improve the staff induction process.

## Children with Disabilities

The Children with Disabilities Team based in the South of the County, provides both assessment and support to children and families anywhere in Monmouthshire, currently the team are working with 171 children. The team includes social workers, support workers and occupational therapists. The areas already indicated in the earlier Access, Assessment and Care Management section apply to this team, particularly in relation to incorporating the child's view and other professional's views within assessments. In 2009/10 the team completed 74% of initial assessments and 82% of core assessments on time, in 2010/11 they have completed 90% of initial assessments and 91.3% of core assessments on time at month 11. It is however acknowledged that there needs to be some improvement in the quality of these assessments.



The team has its own eligibility criteria to ensure that services are provided to those most in need. The team offers a range of support and can also draw on the Council's domiciliary care service and fostering service. Within the service there are two salaried foster care projects providing respite care, however over the last only one of these projects has been in operation due to a need to change carers in the other one.

A range of other service's are commissioned from Action for Children or accessed from other partner agencies including outreach sessional support work in the community, a sitting service, family link carers, short break provision and holiday play schemes. Over the last year we have finished comprehensively reviewing the type and frequency of support children received from Action for Children in order that services are targeted at those most in need, this has proved effective in ensuring the best use of our resources. In order to ensure appropriate services and operate within the current financial constraints all requests for the funding of residential care placements or the residential component of educational placements are considered by a multi-agency specialist placement panel. Over the last year we have struggled in our working relationship with Health colleagues in relation to this panel and it is hoped that this is an area our partners will be able to renew their commitment in. We successfully supported and worked with the Lifelong, Learning and Leisure Directorate in relation to the provision of holiday play schemes for children with disabilities. This continues to be an example of our commitment to promoting independence and social inclusion.

Children's Social Service's seeks to ensure that children and young people with disabilities are able to develop maximum independence in line with their abilities. Currently the Children with Disability team are working with 57 children aged 14 to 18 years old. We have established a Monmouthshire multi-agency transition group which meets quarterly with colleagues in Adult Social Care and other relevant agencies to identify young people who require support with transition into adulthood. A transition project team has continued over the last year but this service has come to an end now and we have identified a team Transition Champion to ensure that the learning from the project is retained and developed. The worker will work with a higher number of transition cases and act as a resource for the rest of the team, advising and disseminating good practice. Over the last year we have maintained our earlier improvements in the working relationship between the team and Social Services providing support to adults.

*'Can we take this opportunity to express our sincere gratitude to you for all your hard work to give our daughter T a chance a promising future'.*

*'We appreciate everything and feel that since you started working for S it is working better for ourselves and has taken a lot of stress and pressure away from us..'*

Another key area of work ongoing is in relation to children with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD). Children's Social Services is represented on the ASD stakeholder group which sits under the auspices of our Children and Young Peoples partnership, this group has an action plan looking at the full range of issues relating to autistic spectrum disorders. The team continues to

welcome this because of their increasing work with children with autistic spectrum disorders. The team has an identified ASD champion who has been trained in running courses for parents to assist them in managing ASD and the challenges this may bring. There continues to be a shortage of short break or respite foster carers who can however provide a service for children with ASD, this is an area that we need to address,

The team also works with a number of siblings of children with disabilities and utilises the services of the Young Carers Project. Over the last year we have utilised direct payments but this continues to be an area we need to review and increase. We are also involved with other agencies in the development of an integrated centre for children with disabilities in the south of the region. We have been involved in the planning of this service and coordinated visits to other integrated services in Camden and Hackney to look at examples of good practice. We are supporting clinics for South Monmouthshire children to be combined on one day at the centre to reduce family travelling time and facilitate us to have workers at the centre at key times, we also have a nominated team link with the Centre.

### **Judgement**

The Children with Disabilities Team continues to need to address those areas and priorities for improvement that are highlighted in the Access, Assessment and Care Management Section. We are however pleased with the progress we have made in relation to our transition work and also the overall range of services we are able to offer to children with disabilities. We have however struggled at times with how we prioritise these resources.

Requires significant improvement	Inconsistent	Mainly good with some gaps	Well established and effective across the board
		✓	

### **Priorities for action**

- Improve the quality of our assessments of need in order to assist with the prioritisation of resources
- Continue to review the current care plans of children with disabilities and the prioritisation of available resources
- Continue to support the improvement of services for children with autistic spectrum disorders including the identification of short break or respite provision.
- Ensure the full operation of our two respite foster care units
- Review the use of direct payments

## **Children Looked After and Leaving Care**

Our overall looked after children (LAC) population has remained relatively stable over this year. In April 2010 we had 83 children looked after and in March 2011 we have 81. We continue to consider and manage our decision-making processes around when children should become looked at our fortnightly resource panel. We aim to continue to ensure that only those children most in need are looked after and our available family support services are targeted at helping children remain within their own families. As mentioned

earlier our resource panel has our family support services present and we support the use of family group conferences as well.

All of our looked after children are allocated to a qualified social worker and have their care plans reviewed by our Independent Reviewing Officer. All of our looked after children's reviews are carried out within statutory timescales. The Independent Reviewing Officer actively audits the information and care plans that we are required by government guidance to have on file, any gaps or shortfalls are raised directly with the relevant management. Last year we were concerned that only 68.7% of our statutory visits to our looked after children were on time, this year we have made improvement this is now at 84.3%.

Over the last year we have managed to ensure that all relevant foster care placement agreements are in place. We continue to need to improve the quality of our plans for permanent arrangements and the evidence of our decision-making; we have continued to actively improve the use of alternatives to long-term care, in future we plan to focus particularly on special guardianship. Our number of children placed at home but remaining subject to a care order remains low, In March 2011 we have two. The process we implemented last year for considering when children may need to be considered within the court arena, has proved effective and more recently has been expanded to include the tracking of outcomes. We have also established a dedicated social worker to undertake our court parenting assessments this year and linked this worker to our family centre (run by Action For Children). We actively support wherever possible contact between children looked after and their families and have a dedicated support worker tasked with supervising contact, however the task is greater than one worker and so continues to be supported via other staff.

We work well with our partner agencies in caring for our looked after children, this includes working with the Health looked after children's nurse and the School Improvement Officers in Lifelong Learning Directorate. However following the retirement of an officer in the Lifelong Learning Directorate we have seen a drop in the number of our looked after children with a Personal Education Plan in place within 20 school days of entering care or joining a new school, in 2008/09 this was 32.5% and in 2009/10 this increased to 60% however at the end of 2010/11 this has dropped to 25%. Educational attainment of children looked after has improved at key stages 2 and 4 and remained constant at key stage 3.

We fund a part time Psychologist to work with our carers and looked after children where permanency is an issue, however over the last year we have experienced a reduced service due to the worker having maternity leave. As mentioned previously we also commission an advocacy service from Action for Children, over the last year we have worked hard to increase the use of this service more by our looked after children.

We have comprehensive information packs that are given to children when they first become looked after and have well developed consultation guides for children and young people to share their views within the review process. Every year we hold consultation days to seek the views of our looked after children through a number of different mediums. All our looked after children are eligible for free leisure passes to our County leisure centres. We also have an arrangement with our local Fire Service for our looked after children to have priority places on the Young Fire Fighters Scheme.

We have worked well over the last year with our elected members to continue a good standard of Corporate Parenting, and are currently planning our second 'Pride Awards' evening where the achievements of our looked after children will be celebrated. This will be held in September 2011 and the Children's Commissioner for Wales will be attending.

Our unaccompanied asylum seeker young people continue to feature within our looked after children population. We are planning to improve our service to asylum seekers by converting some of our support worker hours to qualified social worker hours and establishing a permanent part time post dedicated in working with our asylum seekers. We continue to be well represented at local and regional forums relating to asylum.

Over the last year we have managed to decrease our use of externally provided foster placements. We have where ever possible ensured that only those children with additional needs are placed in the independent sector. Ways in which we ensure tight financial management and decision-making include:

- all requests for placements for children are authorised by service managers.
- all requests for external placements and complex care packages go through our resource panel chaired by the Head of Service;
- all requests for residential care placements or the residential component of educational placements are considered by our multi-agency specialist placement panel
- all decisions to proceed under the Public Law Outline and initiate legal proceedings are now made in legal threshold meetings chaired by the Head of Service or a Service Manager

Our children and young people who are looked after long term have social workers that are in our 'Through Care' Team. This team also works with all of our care leavers and this enables consistency of worker through the transition to independence. We currently work with 42 young people who are leaving care or who have left care.

All of our care leavers are allocated a qualified social worker until they are 21 or 24 years old, this is unique within Wales as other Social Services departments offer unqualified workers post 18 years. We also offer and allocate an independent Personal Advisor to our young people, this Personal Advisor service is commissioned from Action for Children. At present most young people utilise their social worker more than their personal advisor, we aim to improve the use of this service over the next year. It is also apparent that the number of young people offered the service has dipped this year from 100% to 94%, preliminary investigation suggests this links to a change in the personal advisor within the service.

We continue to run quarterly 'Independence' workshops for our young people planning to leave care or those that have already left care. These workshops are co facilitated by some of colleagues in other support agencies e.g. the Police. Last year we noted that we needed to enhance the range of appropriate supported lodgings and supported housing projects available for our care leavers, this remains an area to be addressed however again none of our care leavers are homeless or in prison and our care leavers are given priority status on the County Housing Waiting List. We actively support our young people in further and higher education when ever appropriate; this can include both financial and practical support. At present we have two young people at university.

The Council remains committed to supporting the training and employment of care leavers and the development of apprenticeship and work placements remain ongoing. This is an

example of our commitment to promoting independence and social inclusion. We continue to support our young people in care and post care in social activities and have a football team that play in tournaments within South East Wales. All our care leavers are eligible for free leisure passes to our County leisure centres. Every member of the Through Care team represents Monmouthshire at the All Wales Leaving Care forum on a rota basis; this enables us to draw on local and national knowledge and initiatives.

We remain mindful that this team works with young people for many years and this means the volume of young people eligible for leaving care services may increase faster than those moving on. The introduction of tighter scrutiny of young people transferring in from the other teams at our resource panel has proved effective.

### **Judgement**

We end the year with 81 children looked after, this enables us to be well positioned to improve and enhance our services to this group of children and young people. We do need to continue to make improvements in our range of local placements. We offer our young people leaving care a comprehensive service and are able to demonstrate positive outcomes for many and are pleased with the our performance in this area .

Requires significant improvement	Inconsistent	Mainly good with some gaps	Well established and effective across the board
		✓	

### **Priorities for action**

- Work with our education colleagues to improve the number of Personal Education Plans in place
- Improve the quality and evidencing of our permanency planning
- To continue to monitor those children where court proceedings may be required via the use of our legal threshold meetings
- To continue to scrutinise the use of external placement provision.
- Recruit additional social work hours.
- Continue to improve the use and role of Personal Advisors. Develop improved training and employment options, drawing on placement opportunities within the Council.
- Work with our Housing and Supporting People to develop a wider range of move-on accommodation



### Fostering and Adoption

These two areas have been put together for clarity within this report, though the analysis was carried out separately. Our Fostering and Adoption Services are important aspects of the department in contributing to the outcomes of our looked after children. They are provided via two different teams, the Child Placement Team and the Adoption Team. The Adoption team is a joint Monmouthshire and Torfaen Service, hosted by Monmouthshire. We have experienced inconsistency in the management of both of these teams over the last year, both team management posts became vacant during the year before and continued to be unsuccessful in recruiting permanent team managers.

Within the Child Placement Team interim management arrangements did not prove successful but in the latter half of the year a new permanent manager came into post. Recently this team was subject to CSSIW inspection, the findings of the inspection reflected the obstacles and challenges that resulted from a lack of consistent management and demonstrated that the pace of improvement had been compromised. Despite the lack of management, we had addressed all the required areas of improvement from the previous inspection and have only four new requirements. These include the need to review the completion of carers reviews and how carers receive necessary training, advice, information and support in relation to children placed with them along with, the need to ensure that carers receive written confirmation of their re-approval following review.

*'I think that Monmouthshire Social Services does a really good job'*

We have made many improvements to the processes and systems through which the team's business is conducted, along with the dissemination of our policies and procedures and information available for children and carers. This year we have launched a new private and secure social networking computer site for our foster carers, this allows foster

*'We are pleased with our local fostering service. They are always there when we need them'.*

carers and the team to post documents, provide links to useful websites, carry out simple surveys and to post questions generating discussion on any topic relevant to the foster carer role. We continue to need to improve the consistency of support and

supervision to our current carers. We also need to improve our recording of unannounced visits to our foster carers. We currently offer quarterly support group meetings attended by the Head of Service, this is an effective forum for the sharing of departmental information. This year we undertook a survey of carer's views and noted a number of positive comments about our services.

We have a comprehensive training package for carers, but we continue to need to improve the take up and the recording of this. At the start of the last year we were pleased to be able to increase our foster carer allowances by a further 7.9%. We will be undertaking a further review of our allowances over the coming year with a view to implementing the Welsh Assembly's minimum allowances and considering options of payment for skills schemes. We will also undertake a review of out of hours support available to our carers.

Although we continue to not be able to meet the demand for foster placements within our own service, we have successfully reduced our reliance on external placements over the last year. We have taken steps to increase our social work hours within this team in order to facilitate an increase in the assessment of new carers and have also introduced a new carers 'Refer a Friend' scheme to assist recruitment. We have recently formulated and established new assessment targets for our staff to ensure that adequate performance is



achieved next year. Our placement strategy has been updated this year to reflect the changes in our looked after children population and changing placement need e.g. placements for asylum seeking children, children with disabilities. We are a member of SEWIC, a South East Wales consortium. This is currently focused on regionally standardising the commissioning of independent placements.

The Adoption Service has also been without a permanent manager this year although interim arrangements were in place for some of the year and there is a competent experienced staff group. During the year we have undertaken a comprehensive review of our Adoption Service and the viability of merging or expanding the service. After serious consideration we have decided to merge our Service with the Blaenau Gwent Adoption Service and from April 2011 they will host the service. This will enable us to expand our post adoption support and services to birth parents. Monmouthshire has continued to develop good links with health and education and the Service has utilised support from a council funded psychologist and the services commissioned from Action for Children.

This year six children in Monmouthshire were adopted and 11 adopters were approved. It is noted that although the role of the Adoption Panel was expanded to include permanency planning last year, there remains a need for the other parts of Children's Social Services to fully utilise the panel for other forms of permanency. There is a need to continue to monitor that each child placed permanently has life story work undertaken and that consideration to later life letters is given. We also need to ensure that the allowances that we sometimes pay in respect of adoption, special guardianship and residence orders are reviewed annually to take into consideration any changes in circumstances that people may have experienced.

### **Judgement**

We are pleased that we have been able to increase our foster carer allowances this year but are aware that our support to carers has been affected this year by the inconsistency in the management of the Child Placement Service. We have significant areas that we need to improve over the coming year, including the monitoring of our foster carer reviews and the support and training of our carers.

We are pleased with the plans to merge our Adoption Service with a neighbouring authority and look forward to increasing the effectiveness of our service. We continue to need to embed the permanency function of our adoption panel further within our other teams.

Requires significant improvement	Inconsistent	Mainly good with some gaps	Well established and effective across the board
	✓		

### **Priorities for action**

- Appoint to our new social work post within in the Child Placement Team.
- Implement an Inspection improvement action plan in respect of our fostering service and report progress to CSSIW.

- Undertake a recruitment campaign to enhance our pool of foster carers and Increase the number of completed foster carer assessments.
- Ensure that our foster carer reviews are completed on time and written notifications of re approval are distributed.
- Implement plans to establish a Shared Adoption Service with Torfaen and Blaenau Gwent.
- Enhance our Post Adoption Support Service

### Youth Offending

The Youth Offending Team is a joint Monmouthshire and Torfaen Service, hosted by Monmouthshire. The focus of this service is to prevent offending and re-offending. It is a multi agency team and funded by a range of agencies including Social Services, Police, Health, Probation and the Youth Justice Board (YJB). A challenge to the service over the coming year will be to maintain the quality and range of services in 2011/12 with reduced funding from the YJB and other agencies.

This year the service was subject to an inspection of it's core case youth offending work, this focused on the public protection and safeguarding elements, the service received above average scores in the three areas inspected, namely risk of harm 69%, safeguarding 67% and likelihood of re-offending 74%.. The inspection noted that the service has *'good prospects for the future, on the basis that the staff team are committed and competent and have the full support of enthusiastic and capable managers'*. The Service has a post inspection improvement plan in place that focuses mainly on the assessment and management of risk of harm, this plan is monitored by the YJB.

*'The service has helped me immensely – I've got more patience and understanding'.*

Over the last year the Service has made some structural changes and is proposing now to formally reduce the management tier by one post. This has resulted from the successful integration of the preventative arm within the overall service. There have been some staffing vacancies over the previous 12 month period, more notably a senior practitioner post that was responsible for planning and reviewing processes. This post has recently been filled and will enable greater development within these areas.

*'It has brought myself and my children even closer then we were – we now talk to each other'.*

A number of different agencies refer young people to the team to access a range of preventative services including services dealing with emotional and mental health issues along with substance misuse. Our parenting workers have been trained and accredited in providing 'parentline' programmes, this form of parenting support has received positive feedback.

The Service aims to improve its links with other parenting support and interventions available within Monmouthshire over the next year. We have been able to analyse our performance information more effectively and we have seen a reduction in the number of young people entering the youth justice system (a 50% reduction based on the variation between 2005 and 2010 cohorts) i.e. incurring a first conviction and we have been able to place more emphasis on our preventative services and the development of Restorative Justice Disposals. From November 2009 to January 2011 45 youths have received restorative justice disposals and the re-offending rate is currently 2% in comparison to a 10% recidivism rate for young people having received a reprimand.

We have continued to work hard over the last year to improve the educational attendance of the young people known to the service, we have enhanced the role of our dedicated education worker and one manager now has direct responsibility for educational issues. We attend the multi agency Social Inclusion Network Group and over the last quarter of the year have seen an improvement in the number of young people known to the service in educational provision; however this remains an area to monitor. We also need to improve our links with the Youth Service to identify additional education and training opportunities. We have improved our working relationships with the other teams in Children's Social Services, staff attend the departmental staff conferences and managers are key members of the management group.

We continue to need to work with our housing colleagues to ensure there is safe and suitable accommodation for those young people who are homeless and reduce the use of bed and breakfast.

We have continued to provide a quality service to the Courts via the provision of assessment and corresponding reports. Relevant members of staff have completed two day Assessment, Planning Intervention and Supervision (APIS) training, aimed at enhancing key skills and continuing to develop the provision of assessment and reports. Our reports have on been complimented for the standard by both Solicitors and Judges. The YOS is now in the process of developing an in house training model for APIS.

*'His Honour commended Ms S for the report that had been prepared in every aspect and once again, both prosecuting and defence counsel totally agreed as of course it assisted them also'. Solicitor*

Last year the Service implemented a new statutory approach to working with those young people who have offended, known as the scaled approach. It is apparent that this year this has increased our workload in this area by 6 to 12%, despite national indicators that suggest a decrease of 4 to 12% (this equates to 50 additional contacts per month for young people). This has increased our ability to target resources based upon level of assessed risk and need, we have also undertaken fewer initial assessments. We have worked hard this year to improve how we identify and manage areas of vulnerability or risk that a young person may experience or present.

There is an acknowledgment that the positive work of the YOS needs to be publicised and enhanced within local communities.

### **Judgement**

We are pleased with our Youth Offending Service; it is performing well in many areas of its practice and is contributing effectively to partnership working within the County.

Requires significant improvement	Inconsistent	Mainly good with some gaps	Well established and effective across the board
		✓	

### **Priorities for improvement**

- Maintain the quality and range of service with reduced funding and continue to use our performance information in the analysis of trends in order to enhance service planning.
- Improve connections with other early intervention parenting support within the County and the Youth Service.
- Improve our assessment of individual's risk of harm to others and the timeliness of the completion of risk management plans.
- Develop the initial planning and reviewing processes within senior practitioner function.
- Develop the promotion and publicity of the Youth Offending Service with communities and key members of the council.
- Development and delivery of in house training on Assessment, Planning Intervention and Supervision