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social care
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Joint inspection of services to protect children and young people in the Midlothian Council area

18 August 2011



HAPPY TO TRANSLATE

The inspection of services to protect children¹ in the Midlothian Council area was carried out in April and May 2011. We looked at the services provided by health, the police, the council and the Children's Reporter. We also looked at the services provided by voluntary and independent organisations. Our report describes how good they are at protecting children and keeping them safe. To find this out we read a sample of children's files which were held by these services. We talked to a number of children and their parents and carers to listen to their views about the services they had received. We also spoke to staff in these services who worked with children, parents and carers and to senior managers who were responsible for these staff and the services they provided.

What we found and tell you about in this report is based on a sample of children and families. We cannot promise that this will be the same for every child in the area who might need help.

A team of inspectors gathered all the information and helped to write this report. These inspectors have experience of working across the range of services involved in protecting children. Inspection teams include professional staff who work in council areas elsewhere in Scotland.

Social Care and Social Work Improvement Scotland (SCSWIS) carried out inspections of Midlothian fostering and adoption services linked to the inspection of services to protect children. Any recommendations or requirements are reported on the SCSWIS website: www.scswis.com

¹ When we refer to children in this report we mean children and young people under the age of 18 years

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1. The area

Midlothian is situated in the east of Scotland. It covers an area of 354 square kilometres. The area has the second smallest population of any mainland local authority in Scotland. Most of the population resides in or around the main towns of Penicuik, Bonnyrigg, Loanhead, Dalkeith, Newtongrange and Gorebridge. Midlothian has a population of just over 80,000 with 21.8% under the age of 18 years compared to the Scottish average of 20.1%.

The number of children referred to the council for child protection enquiries increased between 2007 and 2010. The level of referrals is more than for Scotland as a whole. The proportion of children on the Child Protection Register (CPR) in Midlothian is 6.2 per 1000 which is significantly higher than the national average of 2.8 per 1000.

2. Particular strengths that made a difference to children and families

- Chief Officers' commitment to improving services to protect children.
- Partnership working and collective responsibility at a senior management level.
- The range and availability of flexible multi-agency training programmes.

3. Examples of good practice

- Taking an innovative multi-agency approach to reviewing the effectiveness of practice.

4. How well are the needs of children and families met?

Services are giving high priority to helping children keep safe when using the internet and mobile phones. Children learn about internet safety in schools and training is provided for staff, parents and foster carers. Staff from different services are now working together more effectively to identify families needing support when problems are still at an early stage. This is helping many families overcome difficulties and stop their circumstances from getting worse. More effective planning is helping vulnerable young women prepare for and care for their babies safely. Staff co-ordinate support for young children with disabilities and complex health needs very well. This now needs to be extended to other vulnerable young children.

In most cases, staff respond quickly and effectively when they are made aware of concerns about children. Children benefit from helpful joint planning by police, social workers and health staff when concerns are investigated. Staff explain carefully the reasons for any investigation and usually keep families informed about what will happen next. In a few cases, staff do not respond quickly enough when they are told of concerns about children. They do not always pick up patterns of concern which might suggest children need protection.

Staff find alternative safe places for children to stay without delay when it is identified that it is no longer safe for them to remain at home. Staff would benefit from more guidance to help them decide when they should apply for a Child Protection Order when placing children with carers and when it is appropriate to rely on parents' agreement. Police and social workers carry out checks to make sure it is safe when placing children with relatives in emergency situations. Managers should ensure that staff pay attention to recording these checks.

The extent to which children's needs are met is variable. Where staff work closely together to a clear agreed plan, they are usually successful at ensuring children's needs are met well. As a result, children are helped to

recover from abuse and neglect. Their lives are improving and they have a more positive future. In some cases, children are kept safe in the short term, but their longer-term needs are not considered sufficiently. This includes the need to have security and stability in their lives. Staff do not always focus clearly enough on ensuring children's needs get priority over parents' needs. A few children have to wait too long for the services they need.

Children's attendance at school is closely monitored. Staff have helpful guidance on how to respond if children go missing from education. Staff jointly assess the risks to children who run away from home, residential or foster care. The Child Protection Committee (CPC) is developing plans to increase staff understanding of the risks to children who may have been brought into or moved around the country illegally. It is developing guidance to help staff respond appropriately. Individual and group support is available for gay and lesbian young people. Services are working hard to ensure that the rights of all young people are respected.

Many staff form supportive relationships with children and know them well. They see children regularly and spend time with them to ensure their well-being. In a few cases, social workers do not see children regularly enough to build up trusting relationships with them and their families. For a few families, there are too many changes of social worker. A number of different staff members share responsibility for maintaining regular contact with children whose names are on the Child Protection Register. The purpose of each contact needs to be clearer. Staff usually communicate well with parents. They listen to their views and record them sensitively. They support parents to take part in meetings where decisions are made about their children. More work is needed to support children to attend meetings so that they can understand decisions and contribute to plans to keep them safe. Not all children and parents who would benefit from an independent supporter at meetings to help them give their views are offered this service.

5. How good is the management and delivery of services?

Staff across services are alert to and recognise signs that a child may need help. Initial referral discussions are well-established and usually held promptly. Managers need to ensure that discussions are informed by all relevant information from across services. Staff sometimes respond to incidents in isolation without recognising previous similar concerns. They are beginning to record lists of significant events in a child's life so that patterns of risk can be readily identified. Standard formats are improving the structure of assessments. There are helpful examples of timely assessments which fully consider risks and needs. Greater consistency is still required with a much stronger focus on the impact of risks and protective factors for individual children. Updated assessments do not always recognise when risks are being reduced.

Most parents and carers are included very well in child protection meetings. Relevant staff use regular core group meetings effectively to share information and organise help and support. Plans are devised for all children at risk of abuse. These clearly set out what needs to change to keep children safe. They are less specific about how services will meet children's needs and improve their well-being. Staff now need to improve the quality of plans. They should ensure that these are updated to take account of changes in children's circumstances and are used to measure progress in meeting children's needs. Managers should strengthen their role in improving the quality of plans for children. Services should review and plan for children who are looked after at home or by relatives.

Chief Officers are committed to improving the quality of services and encourage staff to review practice to support improvement. The CPC is leading and co-ordinating this work well. Senior managers are getting to know what is working well and what they want to get better. The views of children and families are beginning to inform the changes services require to make. Services now need to jointly agree priority areas for improvement. Managers, particularly those responsible for front-line staff, should work alongside staff and provide effective support and challenge to improve the quality of their work. Together services now need to take a closer look at what difference they are making to children's lives.

6. How good is leadership and direction?

Chief Officers across services are strongly committed to protecting children. The joint Critical Services Oversight Group (CSOG) has a clear vision to ensure all vulnerable groups within the community are supported and protected. This vision is reflected well in service plans and staff are aware that protecting children is a high priority for all.

Robust planning structures have been established with clear lines of accountability through the Community Planning Partnership (CPP). Planned changes to the arrangements for the delivery of the Integrated Children's Services Plan (ICSP) should further improve these arrangements. Senior managers recognise the demand on staff in providing services to protect children. Staffing levels have been increased and resources put in place to support staff and to provide a more consistent approach to help keep children safe. Strong leadership across services is helping to take forward changes in culture and practice. Chief Officers and senior managers willingly support and challenge one another in driving forward improvement. They seek ways to share services with neighbouring authorities and learn from best practice elsewhere. Within social work services more needs to be done to ensure supervisors and managers are fully involved in checking the quality of their staff's work.

7. How are services improving?

The ICSP clearly lays out what Chief Officers want for Midlothian's children. Actions to take forward priorities are agreed and these are monitored and reviewed regularly. Managers have been working very hard together to improve child protection processes and to ensure children are kept safe. More effective leadership and accountability across services have assisted in these improvements. More work needs to be done to ensure staff are fully identifying and meeting children's needs. Partnership and team working at all levels has improved considerably with a much greater emphasis on collective responsibility for keeping children safe. Chief Officers have invested significant resources to strengthen child protection

services. Social work managers have reduced the need for locum staff and have successfully recruited more experienced staff. However, managers need to continue to monitor social worker's caseloads to ensure they are manageable.

Staff across services are now able to access a more comprehensive and relevant training programme which is helping staff to feel more confident working with vulnerable families. Children and families are more involved in developing and reviewing services at a strategic level, such as, the involvement of looked after and accommodated children through the Kids In Care Krew (KICK). Children's voices are increasingly being taken into account at an individual level when planning their care although managers know that this is an area for further development. Although there have been significant improvements across services, further work is needed to sustain progress already made and to make further progress. Senior managers face significant challenges to ensure consistency of key processes and practice to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and families.

8. What happens next?

We are confident that the services will be able to make the necessary improvements in light of the inspection findings. As a result, we will make no more visits in connection with this inspection. Our link inspector will maintain contact with services to support improvements.

We have agreed the following areas for improvement with services in the Midlothian Council area.

- Improve assessment of risks and needs to ensure greater consistency of practice.
- Further strengthen children's plans to ensure they lead to improved outcomes.
- Ensure all managers responsible for supervising staff are sufficiently skilled and confident in reviewing the effectiveness and impact of practice.

Quality indicators help services and inspectors to judge what is good and what needs to be improved in the work to protect children and meet their needs. You can find these quality indicators in the HMIE publication **How well do we protect children and meet their needs?** Following the inspection of each local authority area, the Scottish Government gathers evaluations of four important quality indicators to keep track of how well services across Scotland are doing to protect children and meet their needs.

Here are the evaluations of these for the Midlothian Council area.

Children are listened to and respected	satisfactory
Children are helped to keep safe	good
Response to immediate concerns	satisfactory
Meeting needs and reducing long term harm	satisfactory

We also evaluated the following aspects of the work within the local authority area.

Self-evaluation	good
Improvements in performance	good

Managing Inspector: Fiona McManus
August 2011

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This report uses the following word scale to make clear judgements made by inspectors.

excellent	outstanding, sector leading
very good	major strengths
good	important strengths with some areas for improvement
satisfactory	strengths just outweigh weaknesses
weak	important weaknesses
unsatisfactory	major weaknesses

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