

COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT

REPORT TO: THE CHAIR AND MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

**SUBJECT: SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE – 22ND JULY, 2021**

**REPORT OF: DEMOCRATIC & COMMITTEE SUPPORT
OFFICER**

PRESENT: COUNCILLOR S.C. THOMAS (CHAIR)

Councillors: D. Bevan
M. Cook (substitute for Cllr K. Rowson)
P. Edwards
K. Hayden
S. Healy (substitute for Cllr G.A. Davies)
W. Hodgins
J. Holt
G. Paulsen
T. Smith
B. Summers

Executive Member Social Services

Councillor J. Mason

Representative from Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW)

Ann Rowling, Lead Inspector (CIW)

AND: Corporate Director of Social Services
Service Manager Children Looked After
Communications & Policy Officer
Scrutiny & Democratic Officer / Advisor

ITEM	SUBJECT	ACTION
No. 1	<u>SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION</u> It was noted that no requests had been received for the simultaneous translation service.	
No. 2	<u>APOLOGIES</u>	

	<p>Apologies for absence were received from Councillors K. Rowson and G.A. Davies.</p> <p>Head of Children's Services Head of Adult Services</p>	
No. 3	<p><u>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND DISPENSATIONS</u></p> <p>Councillor Wayne Hodgins declared an interest in the meeting as some of his clients may also be service users of the Social Services Directorate.</p>	
No. 4	<p><u>TIME OF FUTURE MEETINGS</u></p> <p>The Committee AGREED that future meetings be held at 10.00 a.m.</p>	
No. 5	<p><u>SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u></p> <p>The Minutes of the Social Services Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 22nd April, 2021 were submitted.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the Minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.</p>	
No. 6	<p><u>PROPOSED SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME 2021-22</u></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Chair of the Social Services Scrutiny Committee which presented the Social Services Scrutiny Forward Work Programme for 2021-22 (Appendix 1) and to seek approval from Committee.</p> <p>It was noted that the dates referred to on pages 20 & 21 in the last column of the Forward Work Programme should all read 2022.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that the Social Services Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme 2021-22 be agreed.</p>	
	<p><u>ADSS CYMRU – A TRIBUTE TO ALL CARE WORKERS</u></p>	

As agreed with the Chair the Corporate Director of Social Services introduced a short film produced by the Association of Directors of Social Services Cymru in tribute to social care workers in Wales who at great costs to themselves delivered care and support to vulnerable people throughout the pandemic.

A link would be provided by the Corporate Director of Social Services for Members to view the online video.

No. 7

CARE INSPECTORATE WALES (CIW) ASSURANCE CHECK 2021: BLAENAU GWENT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL SOCIAL SERVICES

Consideration was given to the report of the Corporate Director of Social Services which presented the Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) Assurance check summary as identified in their letter dated the 11th June 2021 (Appendix 1). The purpose of the assurance check was to review how well the local authority's social services continue to help and support adults and children with a focus on safety and well-being. This letter summarises the findings of CIW assurance check on 17 May to 21 May 2021.

The Lead Inspector (CIW) gave an overview of the CIW Assurance check in their letter of 11th June, 2021 which summarised how well the Authority's Social Services Directorate continued to support vulnerable adults and children throughout the pandemic.

The Chair commented that it was a fantastic report highlighting how well Blaenau Gwent had performed during the pandemic. Another Member said it was a major accolade as other Authorities could look to Blaenau Gwent to see how well they had performed and hoped that the press would report on this positive message.

In relation to paragraph 6.6 of the report - 'most practitioners who responded to our survey felt supported by colleagues and managers and regarded their workload as manageable', a Member enquired regarding the word 'most'. The Lead Inspector explained it was usually the case with surveys that some issues arise in relation to change as not all practitioners were happy to embrace

change. The Inspector had spoken with management regarding the issue and felt it was not of major importance.

In response to a Member's question regarding issues with the Welsh Community Care Information System (WCCIS), the Inspector said there were major problems with the system. The Corporate Director of Social Services commented that WCCIS was the Health & Social Care computer system that was promoted by the Welsh Government for all 22 Local Authorities and 7 Health Boards to sign up to and implement. Some Authorities and Health Boards had implemented the system but there were major issues regarding reliability and functionality of the system, the Director was aware of plans to upgrade and make improvements to the system and hoped this would be progressed within the next few months.

A Member commented on the excellent report and praised staff on how they dealt with the difficult period of the pandemic and the measures that had been put in place by the Authority to enable placements to stay together and to allow children to see their families and siblings at such a very difficult time and also the support put in place for Social Workers, Foster carers and everyone else involved, he felt this was excellent news for the Authority.

Another Member commented that it was a glowing report from an external agency and felt that it showed that staff were in touch with the clients they supported and showed that the whole of the Council took their Corporate Parenting role seriously.

Other Members echoed their colleagues' comments on the excellent report and felt that safeguarding procedures in Blaenau Gwent were excellent and felt that staff and officers should be very proud of their performance during the pandemic.

In response to a Member's question regarding how the 25 files that were reviewed were selected, the Inspector explained the files were randomly selected from four categories set out in the guidance sent to Local Authorities. The 25 files reviewed included 5 files from Children's Services and 5 from Adults Services. The Local Authority were only given a few days notice as to which files were

going to be reviewed in order to arrange interviews with social workers, team managers and when appropriate the person the file belonged to.

At the invitation of the Chair the Executive Member for Social Services commented that the report was excellent news for the Authority and especially the Social Services Directorate. He expressed appreciation for the complexity of the work undertaken by the Social Services Directorate in supporting vulnerable adults and children and their dedication and commitment to their work was outstanding especially throughout the pandemic, they had faced many challenges with different ways of working and he was proud of the officers and staff in Blaenau Gwent's Social Services Directorate. He expressed thanks to the Director of Social Services, the Head of Children's Services, the Head of Adult Services and all staff for their commitment and endurance during this challenging period. He also thanked the Social Services Scrutiny Committee for the support they gave him as their Executive Member for Social Services.

The Chair thanked the Executive Member for his heartfelt comments and thanked the Care Inspectorate Wales and the Lead Inspector for her comments and delivering the report.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 2; namely that the report and letter from CIW be accepted as provided.

No. 8

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF SOCIAL SERVICES 2019/20

Consideration was given to the report of the Director of Social Services which presented the Annual Report of the Director of Social Services 2019/2020 (Appendix 1).

The Corporate Director of Social Services introduced the report and highlighted the main points in paragraph 6.4 Adult Services. The Service Manager Children Looked After highlighted the main points contained in paragraph 6.3 Children's Services.

With regard to referrals a Member enquired when police visited a family if a Social Worker also attended with them and was there a police officer dedicated to providing that service. The Service Manager Children Looked After said that it depended on the nature of the referral, if there were child protection concerns and those concerns had a criminal investigation element then a police officer would attend the referral. There was a dedicated team of police officers via the public protection unit and joint enquiries under Section 47 of the Children's Act could be undertaken whereby Social Services could make enquiries in relation to the welfare of the children and the police could investigate any criminal element of the concerns.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 2; namely that the report be accepted as provided.

No. 9

UPDATE ON STRATEGY TO SAFELY REDUCE THE NUMBERS OF CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Children's Services which was presented to update the Social Services Scrutiny Committee on the progress made in relation to the implementation of the Safe Reduction of Children Looked After Strategy 2020 – 2025.

The Service Manager Children Looked After spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.

A Member commented that there had been no increase in the numbers of children coming into care and enquired if that was due to the lockdown. The Service Manager said that the long term impact of the pandemic had yet to be seen, the Supporting Change Team had continued to visit children who were deemed to be at risk. Staff had worked hard to prevent children coming into care and had also managed to help children exit care via discharge care orders.

A Member referred to the number of foster carers in Blaenau Gwent and enquired regarding the progress of recruitment of foster carers. The Service Manager explained that most of the assessments taking place at the

moment were kinship carers. In relation to recruitment the Foster Wales brand had been officially launched and they were looking at how to collaborate and work together to strengthen Blaenau Gwent's position in the market for recruitment of foster carers to make it more of a Wales-wide approach rather than local authorities working in isolation against the independent providers.

With regard to recruitment of foster carers from independent providers the Service Manager explained that in terms of the differential of spend, when on-costs were factored in there would be minimal potential savings and felt that there would be better management and support of the Authority's own foster carers.

In response to a Member's question regarding the number of existing and new children coming into care in Figures 2, 3, 4 and 5, the Service Manager said that the overall population would include children who had been in care for some time and would be a rolling figure, children coming into and leaving care those figures would be unique to that month.

With regard to the ages of children coming into care, the Team would look to assess all potential options for that child which could include rehabilitation to parents if the parents could make changes, placement with extended family could be considered or adoption. She assured Members that there were mechanisms in place to ensure that plans put in place to support the child did not drift and children move out of the system as safely and quickly as possible regardless of age.

A Member commented that in comparison to other Authorities what was Blaenau Gwent's position in relation to vacancies within the service. The Service Manager said that the vacancy situation was comparable with other Gwent Authorities, particularly for Children's Services and felt it was a national problem and Blaenau Gwent's offer to social workers needed to be comparable with other Authorities and highlight what Blaenau Gwent was good at, she felt that the CIW Assurance check letter highlighted the good performance of Blaenau Gwent's Social Care staff. In relation to advertising and attracting people into the Social Care sector, the Service Manager said they were looking at

what could be done with Universities and other bodies to make social care and social work a more attractive proposition.

The Corporate Director of Social Services said that it was a national issue and Blaenau Gwent had a 'grow your own' approach over the last 4/5 years which helped support workers move onto the degree course to become qualified. Other Authorities were starting to increase their salary rates and offer incentives, which Blaenau Gwent could not compete with. The Directorate provided additional support to newly qualified Social Workers to retain their services but as a small Authority could not offer the same opportunities for career progression as larger Authorities. The Director advised Members that he could present a report later in the year in relation to social work pay and incentives being offered by other Authorities for consideration by the Social Services Scrutiny Committee.

The Executive Member for Social Services said this issue was a critical risk for Blaenau Gwent and across the whole of Wales. There had been discussions with the Director of Social Services, with the intention to raise this issue with the Directors of Social Services across Wales, to look at all possible ways to run an awareness and/or recruitment campaign to increase the opportunities for people to work in the Social Care sector. He felt it was important to safeguard the capacity of staff in Social Services to be able to carry out Blaenau Gwent's responsibilities in Social Services.

A Member requested that a letter of appreciation be forwarded to all members of staff in the Social Services Directorate to express Members appreciation for the excellent work and commitment shown by all Social Services staff.

This course of action was AGREED.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that the information contained within the report be accepted.