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Dear Director,

Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) Assurance Check 2021: Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council Social Services

This letter summarises the findings of our assurance check on 17 May to 21 May 2021. 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.

Overview

In March 2020, Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) suspended its routine programme in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to enable local authorities and providers to focus fully on responding to the challenging circumstances. A revised programme with local authorities recommenced in September to provide assurance about how people are being safeguarded and well-being promoted during the pandemic. We considered safety and well-being of people who use or may need to use services, the safety of services they access and the safety and well-being of people who work in services.

We focused our key lines of enquiry within the four principles of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and have recorded our judgements and findings aligned to these: People - Voice and Control, Prevention, Partnerships and Integration, Well-being.

We asked:

1. How well is the local authority discharging its statutory functions to keep people who need care and support and carers who need support, safe and promote their well-being during the pandemic?
2. What is the local authority doing to prevent the need for children to come into care; and are children returning home to their families quickly enough where safe to do so?

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We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

Summary of findings and priorities for improvement:

People - voice and control – We asked: How well is the local authority ensuring people, carers and practitioners are having their voices heard, making informed choices, and maintaining control over their lives. While also balancing the recommendations and requirements made by Public Health Wales and Welsh Government to limit the spread of COVID-19?

People we spoke with told us how the local authority had maintained safe contact with them throughout the pandemic. Where needed, direct safe face-to-face contact has continued, subject to a COVID risk assessment. Many people spoke of staff going above and beyond; including where required 7 day a week contact aimed at managing risk to successfully maintaining children at home or supporting adults to remain within the community. We saw examples of both services working together, for example Flying Start support workers redeployed to support with home care duties, to maintain services to those in need of care and support within the community.

Senior managers with staff and partners have worked hard to embed strength based outcomes focussed practice. The authority's commitment to strength based outcome focused practice was evident in the files reviewed and staff spoke of how this underpinned their work in both adult and children's services. The authority recognise the importance of gaining people's views to inform practice development and support service improvement. We saw evidence of mentoring groups and peer supervision to share and reflect on case issues and identify potential responses to learning.

Evidence showed people's views were sought and their voices heard. Information gathering to represent people's circumstances was also informed by intelligence from a number of relevant partner agencies, notably during early stages of intervention.

There is evidence of routine monitoring and challenge by child protection conference chairs and independent reviewing officers (IRO), although this is stronger in some areas of practice than others. When it works well, this provides important checks and balances to decisions about children's welfare. However we were not confident IRO's consulted with all children prior to their reviews and mid-point review. We found practice to be inconsistent particularly in relation to younger children. The local authority must ensure IRO's actively support younger children to express their wishes and feelings and contribute towards the review process.

The local authority has successfully implemented its safe Children Looked After (CLA) strategy, leading to positive outcomes for children within the care system. Working with partners to deliver integrated responsive care, the number of looked after young people has not only stabilised, it is also continuing to decrease. The CLA strategy is continuously supported by senior managers who regularly scrutinise practice to ensure everything has been done to prevent young people entering into care, and those who are in care can be exited as soon as possible if appropriate. Staff spoke of the significance of the Support Change Team and My Support Team (MyST) who work intensively with families to prevent young people entering the care system, The Special Guardianship Order (SGO) Team have been vital in supporting the placements of Special Guardianship arrangements as an alternative to care supporting those families to prevent family breakdown and the return of children into the care system. The authority have been proactive in the revocation of a

number of care orders into SGO's ensuring the best outcomes are achieved for young people.

Most practitioners who responded to our survey felt supported by colleagues and managers and regarded their workload as manageable. During the Assurance Check we found staff morale to be good and most practitioners were positive about their experience of working for the local authority. We heard how training opportunities had continued with a number of digital platforms used to enable staff and partners to access on-line training. Newly qualified staff told us they are supported in their first years of practice by regular supervision and mentoring arrangements. The recruitment and retention of staff is a recognised business critical priority. We found the local authority have adopted a proactive 'grow your own approach' through the secondment of staff to undertake their social work qualification.

All staff and managers reported negatively about the constant issues with accessing and uploading information onto the Welsh Community Care Information System (WCCIS). Staff told us of many instances of how they had lost information or been unable to access the system, often having to download work outside working hours to ensure people's information was recorded on the system. Senior managers were aware of these issues and are continually taking appropriate action to try to resolve the issues.

Prevention - We asked: To what extent is the local authority successful in promoting prevention and reducing need for increased or formal support from statutory agencies?

Prevention is an integral part of the local authorities business. Within children's services we found the commitment to developing Early Help and Prevention services following our inspection of Children's Services in 2018. This approach is now fully evident across both children's and adult services. We found a positive integrated approach to a culture of prevention through joint working, supportive infrastructures and aligned delivery systems between social and health care.

In children services we saw how the ethos of working has shifted towards outcome focused, strength based practice. Within files we found a greater emphasis on work being undertaken with families encouraging them to find their own solutions to achieve outcomes. The development of a number of prevention and early intervention services enabling an early response to those referrals not meeting the criteria for statutory intervention has been a significant development. Within files we found many examples of edge of care services such as Families First providing intensive support and managing risk through delivering interventions with young people and their families to prevent escalation of need. There has been significant progress in not only social work practice but how the service itself is supported; including the development of documentation which are outcome focused and require the family to be fully involved in completion.

Overall, in adult services we found an outcome-based approach was embedded in practice, this supported coproduction and identification of personal outcomes. We saw and heard of how various professionals within the adult integrated teams worked collaboratively to support people's well-being and safety. From the front door Information Advice and Assistance (IAA) operating as business as usual during the pandemic, allowing people to access appropriate support including reablement provision. To the development of Critical

Outreach Teams as alternative to respite and day activities, the authority has strived to promote independence and support people who require care and support.

We found how learning from the development of a 7-day hub service for both acute and community hospitals plus community referrals in response to the pandemic has improved areas of practice. Such as case management and administrative processes, enhanced performance data and streamlined assessment forms to better support the practice of staff. Providers and staff told us of the positive work undertaken by the Community Resource Team (CRT). We saw evidence within files of people accessing the relevant and appropriate rehabilitative opportunities both in the community and within care homes. With the service providing reablement support to those recovering from the impact of COVID to supporting with end of life care.

Staff awareness and practice to establish whether people have mental capacity to make specific decisions and where necessary to make best interest decisions on their behalf was reflected in records and the sample of assessments seen were of a good quality.

Partnership and Integration: We asked: To what extent is the local authority able to assure itself opportunities for partnership working are positively exploited to maximise person centred planning and ensure integrated service delivery and service sustainability?

Strong partnership arrangements and a whole-council response has ensured the provision of support to the most vulnerable adults and children in Blaenau Gwent throughout the pandemic. Leaders have an accurate understanding of the service and have maintained a firm focus on doing the best for delivering services to adults and children who are in need of care and support, despite the disruption and financial strain caused by the continuing pandemic. Leaders and senior managers continue to keep under review new ways of working due to the pandemic, evaluating impact and/or lessons learnt in order to improve future delivery of services.

We heard and saw positive examples of a multi-agency approach to risk management and of practitioners, and managers working together during the pandemic to share information/intelligence to ensure they meet the needs and manage the risk of people with the most complex needs. Providers told us about the good communication and positive meetings with local authority commissioners during the pandemic, with contract-monitoring staff maintaining daily welfare calls with independent providers.

We saw within files and through speaking with people the opportunities for partnership working with health colleagues being effective and successfully promoted to produce positive outcomes for people. Integrated services and posts have provided the foundations for joint working across health and social care. We found practitioners from different sectors and services working effectively together, with CRT staff deployed to Community Hospitals working alongside health staff to ensure safe and timely discharges of people. This is significant as effective partnership working contributes to strength based, person-centred plans and maximises potential for increased independence of people within the local authority.

Providers of commissioned services told us of the support offered by the local authority in navigating the vast amount of information and guidance related to their service introducing new ways of safe COVID working. Working in partnership with Public Health Wales, Aneurin

Bevan University Health Board (ABUHB) and Environmental Health the prompt distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE) and recently coordinating the roll out of Lateral Flow Devices.

Communication between the authority's education directorate and children's services has been assisted through CLA education coordinator and mentors having access to WCCIS, allowing prompt action to any emerging issues for children who are most vulnerable.

We heard from partners how the Safeguarding Team worked well with people from across the sector. We found evidence of good collaboration between social services, the police, and the third sector working directly with people to meet their safety outcomes. We found positive examples of multi-agency approach to risk management and of practitioners, identifying and monitoring vulnerable children and adults at risk. However, staff spoke of some agencies struggling with balancing risk management with family outcomes. The local authority is aware of the need to further work with partner agencies to ensure a strength based approach is instilled and better understood.

Strategically, the authority and its partners had responded to the pandemic through working together to support a shared approach. For example, adapting policy and procedures with health colleagues to support the safe discharge from hospital. The Regional Partnership Board, despite a pause in its activity during the initial stages of the pandemic, has continued to be influential in shaping health and social care services within the local authority.

Well-being: We asked: To what extent is the local authority promoting well-being, ensuring people maintain their safety and achieve positive outcomes that matter to them?

Within both adult and children's services we found safeguarding concerns were responded to promptly in line with statutory requirements. Review of case records and discussion with practitioners provided assurance of a timely and proportionate response to both adult and children's safeguarding concerns. Strategy discussions and meetings were timely and well-supported by partner agencies; which led to effective enquiries.

We found the voices and wishes of people at risk were embedded within the safeguarding documentation and in most of the cases we saw evidence of good information gathering, liaison with other professionals and analysis and determination clearly recorded. We identified good analysis of risk, decision making, protection plans in place, and appropriate action taken when necessary.

The Corporate Parenting board is an active advocate of young people's needs. There is strong involvement and interest from council members and leaders, who often meet directly with young people and show real interest in their lives. They recognise the specific needs of the young people in their care and strive to do their best for them.

Young people who had left care spoke positively about the support they had received from their personal advisors. All felt the commitment of their personal advisors had helped them feel value and supported them in their transition into adulthood. The authority has undertaken some considerable work with housing and housing providers to improve the priority and availability of accommodation for care leavers and this was reflected in the circumstances of the young people we interviewed.

Methods

- we reviewed documentation supplied in advance of our visit
- we spoke with carers and people who were receiving or had received care and support including young people who had left care
- we reviewed 25 files
- we held ten case tracking interviews with staff
- we administered a survey to people who had experience of care and support, providers, third sector organisations, staff, police, and healthcare professionals
- we attended a Resource and Complex Needs Panel
- we met with representatives from police, education department, health, and the third sector

Next Steps

We have identified strengths and areas for priority improvement and we will review the progress of these areas through our performance evaluation review meetings with the heads of service and director. We expect the areas of improvement we have identified to be included in the local authority's improvement plans. We would like to extend our thanks to all those who helped with the arrangements for this assurance check and to those people and staff who spoke with us.

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Yours sincerely,



Lou Bushell-Bauers

Head of Local Authority Inspection

Care Inspectorate Wales