

Damien McCann
Director of Social Service
Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council
Municipal Offices
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Date: 03 August 2020

Dear Damien McCann,

Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) Local Authority Performance Review April 2019 - March 2020

The code of practice for review of local authority social services in April 2019 outlines our intention to write and publish an annual letter for local authorities which will:

- provide feedback on inspection and performance evaluation activity completed by us during the year report on progress the local authority has made in implementing recommendations from inspections and/or child and adult practice reviews outline our forward work programme

This letter summarises our review of Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council's performance in carrying out its statutory social services functions from April 2019 – March 2020.

We acknowledge, that due to the unprecedented circumstances relating to COVID-19, that in many instances we were unable to complete the annual performance review meeting.

We believe that there remains significant benefits in identifying and drawing the attention of the local authority and its partners, to the areas of both strengths and improvements required. The letter is intended to assist the local authority and its partners to continually improve.

It follows the four principles of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and our increasingly collaborative and strengths based approach to supporting improvement.

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

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.

The content of this letter is informed by the performance evaluation activity undertaken by the inspectorate during the course of the year. This activity included:

- practice and performance review meetings, held with heads of adults and children's services
- focused activity was due to be undertaken in children's and adults services during the end of March and April 2020. This activity was postponed due to the pauses all work within local authorities due to COVID-19

During the course of the year we have been in discussions with you, and as such, our annual performance letter content is an accurate reflection of our ongoing findings which we have consistently shared with you.

Summary of strengths and areas for improvement in line with principles of 2014 Act

Well-being

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council has continued to work in the context of the 2014 Act, at a time of financial constraint and budgetary savings, to reshape its services.

The ambition of the local authority's plans signals its commitment to improving people's well-being and independence. There is a clear recognition that a whole systems approach is needed, working in partnership with people who use services, local communities, partner agencies and across children's and adults services, to improve the quality of services.

The local authority's social services benefits from a stable and experienced senior management team and good political and corporate support. There is a shared understanding of the direction and drive needed to ensure that services effectively improve outcomes for people.

A key priority within the corporate plan is accessible provision of information and advice to enable people to support their own well-being. The local authority continues to develop its Information Advice and Assistance (IAA) front door model. This has assisted in a cultural shift both within and outside of social services, increasing the understanding of the public and also politicians in the value of early intervention.

The local authority continues to invest in the learning and development of its care management staff, providing outcome focused training and developing collaborative working. This embeds a culture of practice which results in good quality, strength-based assessments, that are outcome focused, and reflected people's choices and wishes. Robust quality assurance systems ensure assessments are used proportionately and in a timely way to inform decision-making.

People

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council continues to have a stable skilled workforce, with most people having worked for the local authority for many years. As with many Welsh local authorities, Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council finds recruitment difficult in some areas of social care. To address these issues the local authority has linked with

neighbouring local authorities. An example is the management of its IAA being undertaken by a secondment from Caerphilly County Borough Council until a new permanent manager was recruited.

The local authority proactively seeks and considers the views of its citizens including families and vulnerable adults. Services are also reviewed in partnership with staff and partner agencies to ensure services are developed that meet the needs of local people.

Responses from adults to such consultations is positive. Responses from children remains low, resulting in no survey being undertaken this year. The local authority recognises engagement with children and young people as an area for development and will review in line with the Welsh Government review of the Act, to identify how best to encourage participation with this specific group. Good practice has been identified with the work undertaken with The National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) who were commissioned to undertake surveys with the 14 Plus Team and care leavers. Learning from their experiences in care was used to shape service delivery accordingly. Recommendations taken forward include developing skills for independent living and education, employment and training.

There have been positive results from the local authority's implementation of its Safe Reduction of Looked After Children Strategy, which is showing a steady reduction in the numbers of children being looked after. During the year there has also been a decrease in the number of children on the Child Protection Register this has been credited to the Early Intervention Strategy through developing challenge and risk modelling practice being embedded into day to day practice.

The local authority has increased its number of foster carers through working with other local authorities across Gwent to share practice and recruitment. Following feedback from adopters, the local authority has worked with the South East Wales Adoption Service (SEWAS) to improve its service to prospective adopters. Although the number of adoption approvals have increased the number of children waiting to be adopted has also increased in 2018-2019, as have the complexity of needs of children being placed for adoption. A number of initiatives are in place to ensure a positive experience for those seeking to be adopters and current adoptive parents. These include assessments being completed in a timely manner and direct work pre and post approval with both child and adopters for placement.

We continue to monitor the implementation of the Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DoLS) which has identified the local authority, in common with many others in Wales, is unable to assure itself people's human rights are not being breached by being deprived of their liberty unlawfully. Our joint national report on DoLS will be issued in due course. Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council has acknowledged the scale of challenges it faces in meeting the volume of Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DoLS) assessments.

A Deprivation of Liberty team has been commissioned by the five Gwent Local Authorities and Aneurin Bevan Health Board promoting good practice in relation to capacity assessments and best interest assessments is shared across the region. A member of staff from Blaenau Gwent has been seconded into the Deprivation of Liberty Safeguarding Team for 3 days per week. The knowledge and experience gained is transferred back to frontline staff in the Long Term Care Team on return to the substantial post.

The local authority continues to implement the Welsh Language Standards, and there is good awareness across social services of these, and the Active Offer made to citizens.

Prevention

Prevention is an inherent part of the local authority's business. Social services have identified the long term benefits for individuals and families who engage in the services within the prevention agenda. Collaboration is an inherent part of this agenda with evidence of both internal and external partnership working with agencies as being critical in developing and delivering services.

A positive example of this is the 'The MyST' (My Support Team) service which has been in operation since June 2019. The new team has successfully in supporting the planned move of children from residential care into foster placements by providing intensive support to the child, foster carers and their support networks.

The local authority has a robust quality assurance process which enables senior managers to scrutinise performance at different levels so that they have a comprehensive understanding of practice. This facilitates further improvements in practice and developing new processes and monitoring consistency across the teams. The local authority is currently piloting a new quality assurance and evaluation process which aims to drive improvements in practice across the local authority.

The development of a quality assurance framework between South East Wales Safeguarding Children's Board (SEWSCB) and the Gwent Wide Adult Safeguarding Board (GWASB) will help to provide assurance about the effectiveness of inter-agency working arrangements in the safeguarding of children and adults.

The merger of the in house home care team with the health reablement service and introduction of a new emergency care @Home (DASH) service provides support to people at home to avoid hospital admission, facilitate timely discharge from hospital and includes emergency bridging of domiciliary care packages for up to 7 days. The success of this approach is evidence by the local authority having one of the lowest delay transfer of care across Wales.

During 2018 our programme of work focused on care experienced children and young people. The [report](#) is published on our website. Key findings highlight areas for improvement in respect of profile, sufficiency, practice, partnerships, stability, governance and corporate parenting. Many of the areas we have identified for improvement continue to be considered by Welsh Government's Ministerial Advisory Group on improving outcomes for care experienced children and young people and we also hope local authorities will consider their own contribution to addressing these findings.

In December 2019 we wrote to all local authorities asking for information about the Public Accounts Committee report following their enquiry into care experienced children, specifically recommendation 5 concerning the effectiveness and frequency of end of placement reviews. We did not receive a formal response from the local authority. However as the Head of Children sits on the Ministerial Advisory Group for Children, she was aware

of the recommendations from the report and has been able to contribute Blaenau Gwent's experience of end of placement reviews in this arena.

Partnerships

Senior officers are increasingly able to demonstrate how the links between their different directorate responsibilities are supporting the social services agenda across the local authority. There is a wider understanding of the benefits of community-based prevention and the potential negative impact on people and budgets when service planning and responses are delayed or ineffective.

Cabinet members provide political support, explaining policy and practice intent to other politicians and leading debates about frontline practice where necessary for improvement. Elected members understand their role providing scrutiny through supporting and challenging senior leaders while showing commitment to frontline staff and services.

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council describes its relationship with partners and boards as "mature" meaning that they are based on mutual respect and common purpose, with priorities aligned across partnerships. Differences were dealt with appropriately, relationships were beneficial, and challenge was seen as helpful and constructive. All parties are clear about the positive impact that collaborative working has on outcomes for both adults and children.

A clear strength in children's services has been the appointment of a youth and temporary accommodation officer who has provided an invaluable communication link between the 14 Plus Team and Housing Solutions Team. They have been working with young people aged 16, 17 and CLA to look at bespoke housing options.

The local authority recognises that this is a vulnerable time for young people and has responded with a number of positive interventions working alongside Housing First to provide temporary accommodation and supporting housing for care leavers. In addition an accredited course organised by Shelter Cymru's Education Service. "Housemate" informs and educates young people to avoid future housing problems and homelessness. The course was undertaken by 15 looked after children aged 14-16 at the Ebbw Vale Institute, the course will run on an annual basis each year to start preparing the care leavers for independent living.

CIW Performance Review Plan for 2020-2021

Our scheduled thematic inspection programme for 2019-2020 focused on prevention and promoting independence for older people, and for the current children's services thematic inspection the focus is on prevention, partnerships and experiences of disabled children. Due to the current emergency situation relating to COVID-19 we have paused the publication of our older people's report and paused all activity relating to the disabled children's review. We will advise you in due course when we envisage recommencing our inspections.

We hope to publish the older people's national report in due course and want to take this opportunity to thank you for your local authority's contribution to this.

Due to the unforeseen circumstances we find ourselves in, we are currently reviewing and considering our work plan for the remainder of 2020-2021.

CIW worked together with HMI Constabulary (HMICFRS), HMI Probation, Healthcare Inspectorate Wales (HIW) and Estyn to develop a model of joint inspection of child protection arrangements in Wales (JICPA). This approach was piloted during the autumn of 2019. This was a fantastic example of new ways of working across Wales and a real drive towards collaboration and integration in public services.

We continue to work closely with Social Care Wales to support improvement in social care services.

You will note that this letter has been copied to colleagues in Audit Wales, Estyn and HIW. CIW works closely with partner inspectorates to consider the wider corporate perspective in which social services operate, as well as local context for social services performance.

We will publish the final version of this letter on our website.

Yours sincerely,



Lou Bushell-Bauers
Head of Local Authority Inspection

Cc.
Audit Wales
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