

Alwyn Jones
Director of Social Services
Wrexham County Borough Council
The Guildhall
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Dyddiad / Date: 24/05/2021

Dear Director,

Re: Monitoring of improvements in Wrexham County Borough Council children's services from 26 April 2021 to 29 April 2021

Thank you for facilitating Care Inspectorate Wales' (CIW) monitoring of children's social services. Please pass on our thanks to everyone who contributed to make the work possible, particularly at this difficult time of many challenges and competing priorities.

This monitoring is a planned follow up from risk based inspection work undertaken in October 2020. In October 2020 we judged services to remain inadequate with early indicators of improvement. That means services were consistently failing to meet statutory duties but children were not found to be unsupported and at immediate risk of harm or abuse.

CIW in discussion with Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and council leaders have agreed the history of repeat cycles of improvement and decline in Wrexham children's services is unacceptable.

Leaders and managers in Wrexham County Borough Council (Wrexham CBC) must do more to ensure requirements of both the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 are delivered for the benefit of people in Wrexham. Both are key pieces of legislation in Wales, which require public bodies to improve well-being both now and in the future, and

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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.

ensure children have the high-quality sustainable care and support to which they are entitled.

It was evident the CEO has ambition to deliver a change in culture and structure and improve outcomes for children in Wrexham. Significant plans were in place and changes had begun. There were early signs the CEO could be the catalyst needed to deliver positive sustainable change.

This letter summarises the findings of our monitoring activity undertaken in Wrexham social services for children from 26 April 2021 to 29 April 2021. The intention of monitoring activity is to provide assurance that Wrexham social services remains on a positive journey of improvement.

This letter updates some of the detail contained in the CIW report of October 2020. It does not negate the wider range of requirements for improvement laid out in the previous inspection report of October 2020.

Our starting point for monitoring was to recognise the enormous challenge faced by staff, managers and senior leaders. We acknowledge the substantial amount of energy, commitment and time required to transform a failing children's social services into a department that functions effectively, with the checks and balances in place to ensure sustainability of good practice. While we recognise there will continue to be some deficits in practice during this difficult turnaround period, any lapses in response to children at immediate risk of harm or abuse remain unacceptable. We always look for evidence that children are safe and protected from any known risk of abuse or neglect.

We are reassured that during this period of monitoring no children were found to be at immediate risk of abuse or harm due to inaction or poor response by the local authority.

The Accelerated Improvement Board (the board) has produced an array of work streams, action plans, and quite detailed performance measures. We recognise this push for accountability and clear management oversight is a significant part of changing culture in Wrexham. This move away from assuming policies and procedures alone can deliver high-quality sustainable care and support for children is welcome.

During monitoring of case files we found direct links between discussion at accelerated improvement board and improvements in front line practice. We saw evidence of improved management oversight, expectations, and reminders initiated between colleagues encouraging one another to complete work to a high standard within appropriate timescales for the benefit of children.

We found case notes easy to follow and the purpose of local authority involvement in the life of the child easy to identify. Risks to children were explicit and actions to mitigate risks and ensure children are protected led us to conclude there are positive signs of improvement in the overall standard of case file recording and practice.

We looked for further evidence of links between the board and front-line practice and improved outcomes for children. Practitioners made us aware of the traffic light system introduced to identify children at risk and ensure twice-weekly management oversight and monitoring of the quality of support offered. We heard how the expectation of oversight and achievement was driving more effective management of workflow to ensure all actions had purpose and delivered positive outcomes for children.

A dedicated team of practitioners is proactively and systematically working through children looked after files to ensure any drift in practice is addressed. They are seizing positive opportunities to support permanency for children within their extended families whenever possible and appropriate.

We heard mixed messages about reduction in social work caseloads. Some practitioners were keen to describe how reduced caseloads was supporting them to be more effective. Practitioners were able to describe how improved recording in case files and sharing of information between teams is helping them to be better informed. Enabling them to respond more quickly to children and create time to have some much needed and far more rewarding focus on preventative work with children.

Notwithstanding these positive advances, the caseloads for some teams remain unacceptably high. Opportunities and responsibilities to speak with children are missed and recording of meetings important to children remain unacceptably delayed.

The local authority must act rapidly to improve how it facilitates meetings to safeguard vulnerable children and provide social workers with the tools necessary to undertake their professional duties. This includes having access to widely available information technology to engage efficiently and effectively with children and other professionals within statutory timescales. The local authority was challenged on this point in monitoring feedback session and did provide assurance the issue was being addressed with some urgency.

We acknowledge additional targeted resource and additional legal support has been made available to the service. It is important to note the additional financial resource comes after a long period of austerity, it does not compensate for the level of previous losses. We are measured in our expectations of the level of improvement that can be achieved within the envelope of available funding and remain mindful of the challenges of operating a large complex services in the context of insecure funding arrangements.

The pressures on social care staff in Wrexham County Borough Council were significant before pandemic. During monitoring activity it was evident some officers are fragile and feeling the pressure of competing demands. The local authority is taking steps to support well-being. We encourage leaders and senior officers to remain mindful of the competing demands on everyone at this time and ensure

reasonable timescales and resources are assigned to activities, and appropriate supervision and support made available to all practitioners.

Almost inevitably the rapid and large scale change in management structure has caused disruption to local partnership working arrangements. However, there is evidence the new senior managers understand the importance of networks and collaborative working to improved outcomes for children with increased expectation of success.

We heard from external partner agencies how new positive relationships are being forged and beginning to deliver new opportunities for service development. Improvement in services provided jointly between Wrexham County Borough Council and Flintshire County Council social services and Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board for children who require support with mental health issues is a welcomed development.

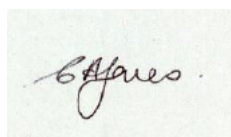
Wrexham CBC's social services benefits from maturing relationships within North Wales Regional Safeguarding Board and between the board and individual local authorities. The maturity of relationships between directors and senior officers in North Wales is a local strength new managers in Wrexham CBC can draw upon to build their knowledge and skills to deliver improvements for the benefit of children in North Wales.

We were made aware of structural changes within children's services department, changes in team structure and purpose, and the differing opinions of which 'model' is the right model for Wrexham CBC children's services. Having a model and being clear on why you think the model will work in your local authority underpins the work in many effective services. Social Care Wales are currently undertaking work on the best model to support vulnerable children in Wales. You may find it useful to contact them for support.

From the evidence gained during this monitoring visit, it is our judgement that Wrexham CBC children's social services is continuing to make improvements required.

It is our intention to follow up with a further monitoring visit in the next six to eight months and to undertake a full inspection in 12 months.

Yours sincerely,



Christine Jones
Senior Manager – Local Authority Inspection
Care Inspectorate Wales