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Director of Social Services
Newport City Council
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Godfrey Road
Newport
NP20 4UR

Date: 04 November 2021

Dear Director,

Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) – Assurance Check 2021: Newport City Council

This letter summarises the findings of our assurance check on 21 to 25 May 2021. The purpose of this assurance check was to review how well local authority social services continue to help and support adults and children with a focus on safety and well-being.

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, Well-Being, Partnerships and Integration.

Overview

In March 2020, 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.

Our focus was on:

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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.

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.

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

Leaders have a line of sight of front line practice with plans leading to innovative and evolving service delivery in many areas. Staff told us about very supportive leadership which was highly regarded. There was a culture of improvement and mutual support driven by leaders across the organisation. This was clearly led by the heads of service. Staff have a shared commitment to work effectively with families within the constraints of the pandemic.

Given the pandemic circumstances, while staff morale was generally good, many staff were exhausted with complex case work and high work volume evident. Children's services were experiencing an unprecedented demand and increase in referrals. In adult services we found services also working under significant pressure. Staff told us their well-being had been prioritised. In children's services supervision records were routinely evident with clarity in decision making recorded. These could have been improved if they were analytical and reflective. Formal supervision was not evident in adult services records, this represents a missed opportunity to evidence shared thinking and rationale in decision making. Staff told us their learning and development had continued with training on line available. The local authority has been supportive in relation to continuing professional development, including supporting practitioners to become to Approved Mental Health Practitioner (AMHP) and Best Interest Assessor (BIA).

There were waiting lists leading to delay in responding to care and support needs for some adults. There was a system to manage and prioritise work, but timeliness needs to be improved both in supporting the well-being of the workforce to manage demand and for those people being assessed for and receiving care and support. Where people did receive help, we found experienced and trained staff assessing need and working with a focus on strengths relevant to the individual.

We found examples of how the local authority has adapted to new ways of working; for example, staff worked with a local charity to refurbish iPads and laptops and redistribute to young people. New services were also established for supported living and residential care for people in transition from children's to adult services. In adult services we heard about volunteers and community connectors being mobilised to respond to the pandemic in challenging circumstances.

The local authority Information Technology (IT) Welsh Community Care Information System (WCCIS) was a major impediment to productivity and a frustration for the workforce because of difficulties for users of the system in accessing and recording. Local authorities across Wales have raised this as a risk in terms of its significant impact on the delivery of care and support.

There were examples of practitioners building trusting relationships with people; we received positive feedback from carers and parents to corroborate this. Practitioners were resilient in their efforts to engage with people and develop relationships based on consistency, stability and respectful communication.

In adult services, proportionate assessments were undertaken in a timely manner and people were then allocated to a waiting list which was reviewed by managers. Although variable, the views of the person (including carers) was central in assessment; people's voices were mostly heard, their choices respected and people achieve self-identified outcomes. Personal circumstances were variably represented; the best examples had a detailed analysis of strengths, risks, barriers and the person's outcomes. In children's services, the recording of the voice of the child was not always prominent with an adult focus noted. Practitioner analysis and summary on files we reviewed were mostly clear and focused. There was good balance of information, proportionate to circumstances. We found recognition of the need to support carers during the pandemic. Information and advice was given to carers and services provided to support their needs. Carer resources have been updated; for example digital resources had been refreshed and there was engagement with the carers' network. We received a positive response in children's services from parents and carers about the support they received.

In adult services voice and control over services people received was underpinned by advocacy as appropriate and corroborated by feedback from providers. This is significant as it supports a focus on what matters to people, the outcomes they want to achieve, and how they can use their own strengths and resources to promote their own well-being. We found direct payments helping people (including carers) to have flexibility in the care and support they received. One example was the creative use of direct payments to provide support by a personal assistant and a night sit service. We saw examples of best interest and mental capacity assessments with clear decision making; we also found capacity assessment reviewed over time to consider fluctuating capacity and changing circumstances. Practice in adult services could be improved if decisions were more explicitly recorded with rationale.

The demography of Newport is such that it presents distinct challenges and opportunities, exceptional to neighbouring local authorities, working with a high number of families with traumatic and complex backgrounds. The local authority works with highly diverse communities, and we found services being delivered in people's chosen language. We found the Welsh language 'Active Offer' being promoted, with people's first language recorded in a mandatory field on the IT system. To ensure the workforce has the knowledge and skills to work with diversity and complexity is a challenge. Services have developed expertise to engage different communities and there are plans to enhance these support services. The ethnic minority community connector posts and participation in community cohesion groups were examples of how this work was currently being undertaken. There is a challenge to match the breadth and diversity of the community in foster carer representation. The local authority has been working on this, for example, working with the equalities lead and linking with mosques in the community. There has been productive

working with Cardiff City Council as lead local authorities in Wales for the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) and the safe transfer of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) from one authority to another.

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?

There was a positive integrated approach to a culture of prevention through joint working, supportive infrastructures across social care and partner agencies. However, waiting lists and demand across adult services teams has resulted in reactive service delivery in some areas and with needs not always being assessed in a timely manner. This means there is potential for relapse and escalation as people wait for a service. The prevention element of service delivery has therefore had a reduced impact during the pandemic. It has been a challenge to provide the right help at the right time. We saw pressure on staff with some teams anxious to move on referrals across services to cope with demand. We did, however, see practitioners appropriately prioritising their responses as necessary and able to safely support people. We found some preventative services working through the pandemic; community connectors and services such as Growing Spaces which have continued albeit virtually.

In children's services we found an early intervention model through which children can access a range of services supported by the Space Well-being Panel which comprised a wide range of statutory and third sector organisations. The safeguarding hub has been a first point of contact to respond to families in crisis. The relatively new Rapid Response service was considered a positive service and other services such as Family Group Conference and MyST were cited by staff as responsive in preventing needs escalating. We found a positive approach to developing creative services, such as Baby and Me and productive relationships with Families First, Barnardos and youth justice.

The local authority has a challenge in placement sufficiency, including those for children with disabilities and exacerbated by significant demand for placements for children with complex and traumatic backgrounds. Work has been undertaken both locally and with regional partners to improve this position and some new placements are available which have a focus on meeting complex need. Positive recruitment of foster carers has seen an uplift in 2020 as assessment has continued virtually.

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?

Partnerships were in the main working well at all levels and delivering an integrated sustainable approach to meeting need and promoting well-being in line with legislation and expectations to deliver sustainable outcomes for people. Mostly evident at an individual level, we found support was underpinned by a relationship of openness and honesty about the options available for people who need care and support and carers who need support.

At an operational level we heard about good communication between local authority services and external partners. The feedback we received from partner organisations described positive and mutually co-operative working relationships. Some small providers were, however, concerned about their longer term financial sustainability. We found

examples of close partnership working; for example joint visits between social services practitioners and staff from the memory service and joint working with a mental health team in a safeguarding situation. In children's services we saw close working with health visitors. There was effective information exchange across agencies in relation to care and support planning. This provided the best opportunity to provide good quality care, securing well-being and preventing the escalation of people's needs for care and support.

We found inter-agency responses could be improved with a better understanding of thresholds across different disciplines. Across the directorate responses from practitioners and managers indicated there was variation across partners in relation to a shared understanding of intended goals and outcomes when working with vulnerable people. The best operational examples were in relation to good information exchange and inter agency contribution in safeguarding processes.

In children's services social workers received good support from local authority education staff and there were strong links between children with disabilities practitioners and schools. We found the process of completing Personal Education Plans (PEPs) could be improved; the liaison between schools and social workers was mechanistic and needed to be more person focused. Improved support from school staff, who understand individual children's educational needs, would enhance the process. At present the PEP process to support children's educational attainment and their social and emotional development does not have the priority it requires.

In children's services, the relationships with the judiciary has continued to be challenging so much so that some practitioners considered this was a factor in staff leaving the local authority. This is disappointing given efforts by the local authority to establish a positive working relationship. This has been a longstanding issue across this and some neighbouring local authorities. The impact on workforce morale has been significant.

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?

The local authority has exercised its functions under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and strives to ensure it makes a positive contribution to the well-being of people who need care and support and carers who need support. At an individual level this has included seeking out the person's wishes and feelings, respectful practice, building upon their circumstances and capabilities. Working in partnership with people to develop creative solutions was evident, improving the quality of care, securing well-being and preventing the development of people's needs for care and support.

We found 'What matters' conversations recording views with emphasis on personal circumstances, strengths, risk, barriers and what needs to happen to achieve personal outcomes. WCCIS prompts were helpful, they enabled practitioners to articulate what they were worried about and what was working well for individuals. In adult services we found many assessments undertaken via telephone and sometimes carers responded on behalf of the person, this meant the elements the person seeking support and protection brings to the process were mostly recognised and valued.

In adult services safeguarding enquiries and investigations were mostly conducted in line with statutory requirements. Strategy meetings and discussions were effective and involved

the right people and agencies. For some people's circumstances, however, the analysis of risk and actions to address safety varied and were not always timely. The best examples were when information was gathered promptly through lateral checks across agencies and prompt actions to address risk where agreed. Some strategy discussions across adult and children's services were delayed and some visits were delayed when working with Gwent police. In adult services, providers said the local authority was responsive to adult safeguarding duty to report circumstances and communicated with them effectively. This would be improved if outcomes of enquiries were routinely articulated to providers as appropriate, for the purpose of understanding safety issues and in relation to learning from experiences.

A new approach to responding to children missing is being finalised with Gwent Police and Llamau; clarity for the workforce will be required urgently as there is misunderstanding at present. This is essential to ensure risks and safety for young people is fully considered.

Across the directorate we found people's circumstances being reviewed and positive contribution across agencies. In adult services annual reviews were being scheduled and we saw care and support being adapted to meet people's changing needs. Relationships and communication with people was collaborative. Strength-based conversations have replaced the traditional needs-based assessments on the whole although some care and support was service led.

For children looked after we saw effective support from the multi-agency group and a good standard of reviews led by independent reviewing officers (IROs) who were able to work effectively with practitioners. We received positive feedback from care leavers who were highly complimentary about personal advisors (PAs). They said it was important to be listened to and their voices heard.

Method:

- we reviewed documentation supplied in advance of our visit
- we spoke with 11 carers and people who were receiving or had received care and support, including two care leavers
- we reviewed 30 files
- we held ten case tracking interviews with practitioners and managers
- we interviewed five partner and safeguarding lead professionals
- we observed a weekly IMT meeting
- we held eight focus groups
- we administered eight surveys

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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lou Bushell-Bauers', written in a cursive style.

Lou Bushell-Bauers
Head of Local Authority Inspection
Care Inspectorate Wales