

Lance Carver
Director of Social Services
Vale of Glamorgan Council
Civic Offices
Holton Road
Barry
CF63 4RU

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Dear Director,

Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) - Assurance Check 2021: Vale of Glamorgan Council

This letter summarises the findings of our assurance check on 22 March to 26 March 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.

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 of assurance checks recommenced in September.

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

Arolygiaeth Gofal Cymru (AGC)
Swyddfa Llywodraeth Cymru
Sarn Mynach
Cyffordd Llandudno
LL31 9RZ
www.arolygiaethgofal.cymru

☎ 0300 790 0126
☎ 0872 437 7303
✉ CIW@gov.wales

Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW)
Welsh Government Office
Sarn Mynach
Llandudno Junction
LL31 9RZ
www.careinspectorate.wales

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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.

Our focus was on:

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?

The local authority told us of how in adults and children's services contact had mostly been maintained throughout the pandemic, virtually and face-to-face where required, and risk assessed as appropriate to do so. A majority of the people who responded to our survey said it had been easy or very easy to make contact with social services. For example, one person commented, *"In the beginning it was difficult to make contact. But over the year it has become easier. So really I would have given a rating of not easy a year ago and now it is very easy"*.

Carers we spoke with told us of the support they had received during the pandemic. Designated carers officers are located in the adults service teams. A carer's gateway was launched shortly after lockdown with the aim of supporting the service provided to carers. We saw examples where carers had been offered a carer's assessment, however written documentation was not available to clarify whether the assessment had been completed, and if so the outcome of the assessment. Improvements are required to ensure there is a clear audit trail relating to carers assessments to ensure people's needs are being met. The local authority should review the processes in place for communicating outcomes of carer's assessments to ensure that the assessment forms an integral part of the care planning process.

Overall, in adults services we found people's views were sought and their voices heard. This was evident in the records we viewed and feedback received from people. Matters relating to mental capacity and best interests were routinely considered. We saw some good examples of mental capacity assessments and use of advocates, where required.

The local authority needs to ensure the independent reviewing officers (IRO's) are consistently ensuring the voices of children and young people are heard, and they are supported to participate in their reviews. This is an area highlighted by CIW in a previous

inspection and focused activity. While we recognise the challenges presented during the pandemic, there was a lack of written evidence to confirm IRO's were consistently attempting to speak/meet with children and young people. Neither was there sufficient written evidence to confirm they were consistently monitoring how well plans were being delivered to meet the child's well-being outcomes, and no evidence of mid-point reviews that would assist with this.

In children's services, there was clear evidence of a focus on the child/young person, and focus on supporting families to stay together. There was evidence of priority given to children in care having time with their families. Face to face meetings were undertaken when safe to do so and alternative virtual means of communication used when necessary.

A key priority for the local authority is to ensure continued staff recruitment and retention. We saw there were gaps in some teams in children's services. The local authority told us they had attempted to recruit to vacant posts and recruitment strategies were in place. Agency staff were used to fill gaps in some of the teams. Maintaining a stable workforce is particularly challenging in children's services. This coupled with significant increase in demand for services has resulted in reduced capacity and created caseload pressures for some teams. Recruitment and retention of a stable workforce must remain a priority for the local authority. We will continue to monitor this as resilience and capacity within teams is essential to ensure sustainability of statutory functions.

Ensuring staff well-being is a key priority for senior managers. At the beginning of the pandemic, systems were put in place for agile working and initial IT issues were resolved. Resources had also been flexed across the local authority and targeted to areas where they were most needed.

We found staff morale was generally positive and managers were well regarded by staff. Staff said there had been good communication from senior managers and they had been responsive and visible during the pandemic. Most practitioners who responded to our survey felt supported by colleagues and managers and regarded their workload as manageable.

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?

The local authority benefits from a core group of operational managers who have an understanding of their roles, responsibilities, and ambitions for services. Managers reported they had received effective leadership and support from the local authority during the pandemic with positive channels of open communication initiated and sustained. They told us how virtual and closer working with partners had assisted in developing and strengthening working relationships, which they all hoped would continue and underpin creative regional solutions to the commissioning and delivery of care and support.

Providers told us the local authority had effectively shared information to ensure people's well-being was promoted and protected. It had also supported them to quickly adapt their services to ensure people received a safe service. We found a prudent approach to resource allocation and a focus on outcomes for people which had further developed/strengthened between the local authority and providers to ensure the effective targeting of resources.

There are waiting lists in some areas of service including Adult Intake and Assessment Team, Children's Intake and Family Support Team, and Occupational Therapy Service, resulting in some people having to wait for a service. The local authority told us waiting lists are regularly monitored and risk assessed by managers.

The local authority has continued to promote the take up of telecare services to support people's safety and well-being and has waived the installation fee for telecare services since late March 2020, pending a review of the service.

Practitioners told us of the support provided by Enfys, a team of clinical psychologists, graduate mental health workers, and occupational therapist who sit within the Children, Young People and Families Division. The team supports practitioners and foster carers to understand the child and respond to them in a therapeutic way.

Professionals identify children and young people in need of help and protection and make appropriate referrals to children's services. In many cases, we saw timely and effective responses that led to children and families receiving effective, proportionate, and timely interventions that improved their situation. However, in a few cases there was a lack of evidence to confirm that during the pandemic children's safety and well-being was consistently promoted. The local authority must ensure it is consistently monitoring and promoting the safety and well-being of children, young people, and their families. This is an area for improvement which we will continue to monitor.

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?

It was apparent relationships with partners had been strengthened during the pandemic. We heard of and saw some positive examples of a multi-agency approach to risk management and of practitioners, managers, and agencies working together and sharing information. We saw some positive examples of how effective partnership working and sharing of intelligence had resulted in contributing to identifying and monitoring vulnerable children and adults' needs and risks.

Care home, domiciliary support, and day service providers we spoke with told us the communication from the local authority during the pandemic had been very good. They were very complimentary of the support provided by the local authority. One provider

commented *'social services has been outstanding in facilitating what we needed...There is always someone we can turn to.'*

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?

Generally, when children need immediate protection a swift response and appropriate decisions are made to escalate to child protection investigations. We found most practitioners know the children they are working with well and have clear understanding of their needs.

We heard how the local authority are revisiting the structure of the adult safeguarding team in order to strengthen the team with additional posts. We found generally there was a timely response starting adult safeguarding enquiries but the information recorded was not always clear, e.g. date of conclusion of enquiries. Generally, we found that adult safeguarding concerns were reported in a timely manner. We did see one example where a few staff were aware of a safeguarding concern and failed to report the safeguarding concern in accordance with the Wales Safeguarding Procedures.

In the cases we viewed in adult services, we found assessments and reviews were undertaken in a timely manner and within statutory requirements.

The quality of assessments, care and support plans, and recordings, varied. Some of the documentation reviewed did not always reflect the positive work being undertaken. We saw some examples where a more explicit focus on strengths and where applicable the support provided by family members and other sources would have been beneficial in providing a holistic view of the child/adult and their individual circumstances.

In children's services we found further work is required to ensure assessments and care and support plans are systematically co-produced with children and families leading to the identification of personal outcomes and the provision of services and support to achieve these.

The local authority had informed us they were aware of some gaps and delays in recording; this was evident in some of the files we viewed. In some of the children's cases viewed, it was difficult to understand the child's experience and whether statutory responsibilities had been met, due to records not being up to date, gaps in recording, and delays in uploading key information onto Welsh Community Care Information System (WCCIS). While we acknowledge that the local authority's primary focus during the pandemic has been on direct support/intervention, the lack of available up to-date recorded information in order to make timely, appropriate, and proportionate responses/decisions presents risks which could potentially impact on individuals' well-being. Improved recording of information and ensuring it is accurate are areas for improvement

We saw how services had been adapted and delivered in different ways. For example, we saw that where needed and safe to do so day services staff had provided outreach support.

They maintained contact with people and carers and provided support and activities via digital means. We heard how the continuation of services/support had made a positive contribution to the safety and well-being of many people.

Method:

- we reviewed documentation supplied by the local authority
- we spoke with people who were receiving or had received care and support, including 5 care experienced young people and 8 carers
- we reviewed 35 case files
- we held ten case tracking interviews with staff
- we administered surveys to; people who had experience of care and support, providers, third sector organisations, staff, healthcare professionals
- we attended the Corporate Parenting Panel Meeting
- we spoke with practitioners, managers and providers

Next Steps

We have identified strengths and areas for improvement. We will review the progress of these areas through our ongoing performance review activity. 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,



Vicky Poole
Deputy Chief Inspector
Care Inspectorate Wales