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Dear Director

Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) – Vale of Glamorgan Council follow up assurance check (Children & Young People’s Services)

This letter summarises findings from our follow up assurance check undertaken between 23 and 25 November 2021. The purpose was to review how well Vale of Glamorgan Council (local authority) Children and Young People Services (CYPS) and the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) service had progressed on their improvement journey to help and support children and families since the Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) assurance check undertaken in March 2021.

Our focus was on the safety and well-being of children and families. We specifically focused on improvements, the experience of children and young people and whether statutory duties and responsibilities, including practice expectations had been met. We also considered whether there was sufficient information recorded on case files to support timely, appropriate, and proportionate decisions. We sought assurance to confirm IROs were consistently promoting the voice of children and young people and monitoring how well plans were being delivered to meet well-being outcomes. All of our key lines of enquiry were framed within the four principles of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014.

Summary of findings:

People - voice and control - We asked: How well the local authority is working to support children and families to have their voices heard and to what extent:

- *Are children and young people supported to participate in assessment, planning and review?*
- *Is the stability and capacity within the workforce sufficient to sustain statutory duties?*

The local authority had responded proactively to the areas for improvement identified by CIW at the assurance check undertaken in March 2021. Under the corporate banner of the

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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.

Reshaping Services programme, an action plan had been developed which set out details of required improvements and timescales for delivery. The plan includes actions to promote the voice of the child, implementation of a strength-based approach, as well as actions to strengthen management oversight, collection and analysis of performance data and quality assurance systems. Interviews with senior leaders confirmed political and corporate support for the programme and a shared understanding of the need for improvements.

We recognise the local authority has invested in the development of a bespoke strength-based approach to social work practice. The local authority see this as long-term transformational change which builds on the skills and expertise of workers to help families achieve what matters to them. We were informed the implementation of the strength-based approach was a reflective and evolving plan to ensure the approach becomes embedded as part of the day to day functioning of the local authority.

We were told about strategic buy-in to the approach evidenced by senior managers and elected members' participation in training and development workshops. The local authority is aware of the importance of regular communication about the approach to colleagues and partners, aiming for multi-disciplinary agreement and support for the practice framework.

We found staff had been provided with "kitbags"¹, and had been part of workshops on how to use the various tools within them. Responses to our staff survey included positive comments from practitioners regarding the constructive use of the "kitbags" in their work with children and families. Nevertheless, we did not find a cohesive framework to ensure consistent strength-based practice in place. Further embedding of the approach should be implemented at pace. Not only will such a culture change underpin practice improvement across all services, specifically, it will provide a clearer framework and shared vocabulary that will enable professionals and families to more effectively identify and achieve positive outcomes for people.

The IRO service are clearly committed to ensuring the voice of the child is heard as well as more effective engagement with children looked after in reviews of their care and support. We were assured by IROs regarding their increased engagement with children and young people prior to reviews when appropriate. Following the last assurance check the IRO service held development sessions to consider its own practice and areas for improvement, including the review of practice standards. We found children looked after were supported to participate in their reviews. Their language, communication and level of emotional and developmental maturity is explored. Alternative communication needs and observations were noted on files reviewed. It is positive that IROs are seeking feedback from individual children and are looking to identify and learn from what has worked best for them.

The local authority gives regard to the rights of children to be offered formal advocacy. Information provided by the local authority, confirmed children were offered access to advocacy services and we saw evidence of this recorded on the files of care experienced children. It was noted in a number of cases long-term foster carers acted as strong advocates for children in their care.

Inspectors were informed that due to COVID-19 restrictions some of the consultation activities that would have routinely been undertaken with children and young people in

¹ A toolkit to promote socially and emotionally literate relationships between children, professionals and carers

respect of service changes had not been possible. However, the local authority had responded to messages from practice and feedback from children and young people in relation to language used. For example they have replaced the term “contact” with “family time” to reflect the terminology preference of children and young people. The local authority are looking to build on positive learning. Alongside consultations with children, they are intending to introduce a virtual platform or App to gain children and young people’s views.

In common with many other local authorities in Wales, the Vale of Glamorgan Council is managing significant workforce issues. Capacity planning is a key work stream within the directorate’s Reshaping Services programme, recognising the importance of stability and sufficiency of the workforce. We found there was corporate support committed to increasing workforce capacity, evidenced by a sustained and imaginative approach to recruitment and retention alongside more investment in a “grow your own” approach to professionally developing current staff.

The local authority has identified the recruitment and retention of staff to the Intake and Family Support Team (IFST) and the Care Planning and Proceedings (CPP) Team as business critical areas. As a response, enhanced salaries have been introduced to attract recruitment to these teams. The local authority are aware of the implications for children and their families of changes within the workforce created by use of agency staff. It is positive that CYPS are developing direct links with recruitment agencies and are maintaining data about use of agency staff to ensure a clear line of sight on most effective deployment.

Discussions with managers and reviews of case files evidenced stability within the Children Looked After Team and 15+ Team. The social workers in these teams knew the children they work with well and understood their circumstances. We found children and young people looked after had benefitted from the opportunity to develop relationships with practitioners.

We frequently heard from managers about the highly committed workforce. The majority of staff who responded to our survey and the IROs spoken with confirmed they felt supported by their colleagues and managers. Just over half of the survey respondents said their caseloads were manageable, although many referenced “fatigue” and “burn-out”. It is to the credit of senior managers and the workforce that despite the challenges brought about by the pandemic, sickness/absence levels had remained static and staff morale generally was good. Promoting and maintaining the well-being of the workforce is clearly a priority for managers and senior leaders.

Well-being - We asked: – How well is the local authority meeting its statutory duty to promote children’s well-being; ensuring protection of children from harm, neglect and abuse and supporting families to achieve positive outcomes that matter to them and to what extent:

- *Assessments and reviews are undertaken in a timely manner in accordance with statutory timescales?*
- *Recording quality of assessments and care plans reflect the positive work being undertaken with children and families?*

Data submitted by the local authority confirms significant improvements are required to ensure assessments and reviews are undertaken within statutory timescales.

Further work is required to ensure statutory visits are undertaken in a timely manner. Although we were assured from case reviews and discussions with managers and IROs children and families were seen (during COVID restrictions) and continue to be seen, many “visits” did not meet the required practice standard of a “statutory visit” and have therefore not been recorded as such. We recognise, as do the local authority, the potential impact on safety of this compromise and as such the local authority should achieve swift improvement in this area.

The local authority were taking action to strengthen their performance data and quality assurance systems. Work included streamlining processes within the electronic record management system Welsh Community Care Information System (WCCIS) and development of practice standards aimed at achieving more consistent performance data collection. The local authority is working hard to cleanse its performance data to strengthen managers’ and workers’ understanding of their compliance with regulatory requirements but also so that the local authority can respond more effectively to any short falls. Agreement has been given to provide CYPS with dedicated capacity to undertake this work.

The local authority had introduced appropriate measures (RAG system) to address challenges experienced by a sustained increase in referrals and workforce pressures resulting in delays in allocating assessments/re-assessments. These arrangements ensure the prioritisation of allocation of work, with consideration given to level of risk, need and waiting time. When cases are not allocated referrers/partner agencies are advised in order to ensure a partnership approach to promoting the safety and well-being of children and families concerned. Discussions with managers demonstrated they were aware of the importance of recording referral outcome decisions and management oversight. We saw evidence of this on case files reviewed.

We found the quality of assessments and care plans was inconsistent with some requiring significant improvement. The local authority had worked hard to promote a stronger voice for children and young people in their care and support plans and the review process. Most of the assessments and plans we saw were not outcome focused nor was it evident that children and families had been involved in co-production. The local authority must progress the development of quality assurance systems identified as part of the Reshaping Services programme to ensure more systematic monitoring of the quality of assessments and plans aimed at driving quality improvement.

In one case reviewed, records failed to reflect checks being made with the school further to a safeguarding concern being raised. Discussion with a manger subsequently evidenced the concerns were followed up with the family. Inspectors acknowledge work in progress, however the local authority should ensure greater specificity of records to ensure compliance with relevant codes of practice and legal requirements and to evidence management of risks to children’s safety.

The IROs presented as confident in their role and in their ability to challenge and escalate cases as required. The IRO service plan to attend social work team meetings and are working with statutory partners to ensure there is a shared understanding of their role and to reinforce the child’s ownership of their review. IROs were respectful of the current case

pressures in the social work teams and had been proactive in working with teams to reinforce the importance of them being kept well informed of any significant issues.

A business case to increase IRO capacity was being considered by the local authority reflecting the redefined scope of these workers' responsibilities to accommodate an enhanced quality assurance role. Changes to these arrangements once implemented across all teams have the potential to support required improvements to practice.

An IRO mid-point check including discussions with the social worker, placement provider and direct contact with the child/young person had been introduced. Evidence of this was seen on the files reviewed. IROs indicated this had increased their workload but the new arrangements were valued and the midpoint check was constructive in ensuring progress, identifying potential drift or barriers. The local authority should ensure these activities are consistently captured within records.

In discussion with managers and IROs, whilst they were confident that practice is child-focused they recognised the need to refresh arrangements to ensure that work undertaken to capture the voice and experiences of children and families is more explicitly and consistently reflected in records. Directly capturing the child's own words might have a more powerful resonance for some children and young people.

Prevention - We asked: How well is the local authority promoting prevention and reducing need for increased or formal support from statutory agencies and to what extent:

- *Can children and families receive timely proportionate preventive interventions that improve their situation?*
- *Can children and families access care & support in a timely manner?*

We found evidence of the provision of early intervention and prevention services to assist in supporting some children and families. We saw good use of signposting to Families First Advice Line (FFAL), evidence of Families Achieving Change Together (FACT) team supporting children and families not eligible for care and support and/or being "stepped-down" from care and support. We heard an increasing volume of families with needs not eligible for care and support were being supported by a team around the family (TAF) and that capacity in FFAL had been strengthened in recognition of increased demand.

We were assured that information and communication exchange between early help and statutory services was effective at both strategic and operational levels. It is positive that the management structure in CYPS facilitates a direct line of sight of the interface between services providing a "safety net" for some families where more intensive work became a necessity. Early help practitioners and Children's Services statutory teams have access to consultancy from a variety of specialists in particular substance misuse and primary mental health workers and the police community support officer (PCSO).

Data provided by the local authority indicates there had been a significant increase of demand for services. There had also been an increase in the numbers of children looked after. Despite best efforts of the local authority it is apparent there remains insufficient capacity currently within CYPS workforce to meet these increasing demands. This means that children and families cannot always access care and support in a timely manner. Evidence from our review of case files supports this finding.

In recognition of and in response to the significant increases in demand experienced at the 'front door' and the need to ensure delivery of a safe services, the local authority initiated a work programme dedicated to the improvement of processes within the IFST. Additional practitioner manager and social worker posts had been approved. Social care officers were also being recruited to support social workers, and wider divisional and directorate resources had been used flexibly to alleviate pressures. At the time of our follow up assurance check it was too soon to comment on the impact of these changes.

The case files of care experienced children we reviewed clearly demonstrated a positive focus on promoting permanence, including within the family. We found the importance of family time with birth family was well understood by social workers. Where permanence was achieved through long term fostering the care planning arrangements supported children and young people to develop a clear sense of identity. We saw evidence in care and support plans of direct work to help children understand their situations. For the most complex case-work, staff were supported through consultation at the psychology panel and children and families by the ENFYS team (a psychological service seen as having a positive impact on the care and well-being of children and families accessing this service).

Partnership and Integration - We asked: How well is the local authority able to assure themselves opportunities for partnership working ensure integrated service delivery that drives sustainability and to what extent:

- *Do partners work collaboratively with the local authority to support the safety and well-being of children and families*

The impact of the pandemic has created disruption to well-established regional and local partnerships arrangements. However, we heard regional safeguarding and partnership boards have now resumed and joint management executive meetings have begun to reprioritise children's services. More recently joint planning across the region, including the Health Board, is developing a response to meet the accommodation needs of young people with mental health needs who are being discharged from hospital, and work was being undertaken with police colleagues to better align thresholds with a view to achieving more consistent practice. Innovatively an App is being developed to support police officers decision making regarding when to refer to children's services or to FFAL.

At best, evidence seen in case files supports constructive partnership working in the context of safeguarding. We saw evidence of partners submitting safeguarding reports and contributing to strategy discussions/meetings. At worst, one case we reviewed evidenced a delay in undertaking a joint visit with a partner agency; records were not maintained of the attempts made to arrange the visit nor of the reasons for the delay.

The majority of staff who responded to our survey rated partnership working to support children and families to have their voices heard and to receive effective, proportionate and timely interventions that improve their situations as good or very good.

We saw strong partnership working between CYPS and Resource Management & Safeguarding (RMS) divisions. Senior managers from these divisions demonstrated a shared commitment to ensuring the safety and well-being and children and their families.

Conclusion and Next Steps

The local authority has worked hard to respond to the findings from the last CIW assurance check. Improvements are required to further promote children and families to have their voices heard; to ensure the quality of assessments and reviews are improved and that these are produced in a timely manner in accordance with statutory timescales.

Work has commenced with regards to strengthening the standard of recording but this work needs to embed to ensure the standard of recording is consistently good. Increased pace of change in respect of implementation of a consistent strength-based approach and more systematic use of both quantitative and qualitative performance information will assist in achieving the improvements required.

During our next performance review period (2022 – 23) CIW will continue to monitor progress alongside the local authority through routine performance review activities. Progress will be regularly reviewed internally through CIW local authority risk based approach to inspection planning.

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Yours sincerely,



Lou Bushell-Bauers
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Care Inspectorate Wales

Appendix 1

Methodology

- we reviewed documentation supplied in advance of our inspection
- we reviewed 14 case files (nine recent referrals/assessments and five children looked after post first six month review)
- we held collaborative conversations with operational managers about the case files we reviewed
- we issued a staff survey to CYPS and IROs
- we held three workshops which included heads of service (CYPS and RMS) and operational managers, focussing on: children's voices, interventions and workforce
- we held a focus group with IROs their manager and the manager of CPCP team
- we spoke individually with the statutory director of social services and cabinet member for social care and health

NOTE: Given the format of this inspection, it has not been possible to triangulate findings with front line practitioners, partners or people who use services.