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Dear Director,

Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) – Follow up inspection

An assurance check was undertaken in Denbighshire local authority between 28 of June and 02 of July 2021. Positive areas of practice were identified across both adults and children's social services as well as areas requiring improvement within children's services. The local authority promptly responded and submitted an action plan to CIW that included specific actions and audits to assess the standard of decision-making and management oversight in children's services.

The aim of this inspection was to assess progress made in relation to those areas identified as requiring improvement. Our focus was on the safety and well-being of children and families. This included the local authority's practice of reviewing, analysing and decision-making in relation to risk. In addition, whether the local authority was meeting its statutory responsibilities in line with the requirements of the Social Services and Well Being (Wales) Act 2014.

Lines of Enquiry

The following questions were considered in line with the principles of the 2014 Act:

1. **People - voice and control** - How well the local authority is working to support children and families to have their voices heard?
2. **Prevention** - To what extent the local authority is successful in promoting prevention and reducing need for increased or formal support from statutory agencies. Including

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taking all necessary steps to support the upbringing of the child by the child's family, and preventing a pattern of re-referrals?

3. **Well-being** - To what extent the local authority is meeting its statutory duty to promote the well-being of children; ensuring protection of children from foreseeable harm, neglect and abuse and supporting families to achieve positive outcomes that matter to them?
4. **Partnerships** - To what extent are local authorities able to assure themselves opportunities for partnership working are positively exploited to maximise person centred planning, ensure integrated service delivery and drive service sustainability?

People - voice and control - How well the local authority is working to support children and families to have their voices heard?

Files reviewed evidenced variable practice in how well children's voices were heard. There were examples of children being seen and spoken with and where appropriate had being spoken with alone. However, we saw examples whereby parents and children had not been spoken with, where they should have been. This means practitioners did not always have an understanding of children's lived experience. In some examples, files were abruptly closed without ascertaining people's views.

The local authority must ensure the voice of individual children and their family is consistently sought, and prioritised within assessments of children's care and support needs, as well as within the compilation of care and support plans, and care and support protection plans.

The recruitment and retention of social care staff is a national area of concern. It is a particular area of concern within intake and intervention teams in children's services in Denbighshire local authority. The current situation places significant pressure on staff who we found to be dedicated, aiming to ensure the best outcomes for children and their families. Staff are working incredibly hard to try to meet demand, and are often working long hours. The local authority must ensure a sufficient and suitably qualified workforce.

The local authority recognises this duty and has responded strategically by acknowledging that lack of capacity within the social care workforce is a risk and have highlighted this in their corporate risk register. Positively, a project group is underway to review recruitment and retention of social care staff across the whole of social services. The aim is to identify how the local authority can become more competitive in the recruitment market. We heard from the director about steps that will be taken in the meantime to support timely recruitment. This to include the appointment of a Human Resources personnel staff member to focus solely on recruitment of staff to social care. A further positive development is the permanent appointment of suitably qualified, experienced and competent Head of Children's Service. Staff in teams with most staff absences and vacancies told us how there was whole service support to assist them in their practice with staff and managers from other teams promptly responding to requests for assistance.

Staff we spoke with were complimentary about both managerial and peer support, noting there was a consistent focus on staff well-being. This was corroborated in supervision records seen, with appropriate emotional support provided by managers. Care First (Employee Assistance Programme) is also available to staff within the local authority as an additional emotional support resource.

Staff described how the implementation of practice improvement sessions in line with the local authority's action plan were beneficial. Such opportunities identify positive practice but also areas where practice could have been done differently, and more effectively. Despite caseloads being very high in some teams, staff had been supported to attend relevant training, which they said had been positive for their learning and development.

The Head of Children's Services has an active role in monitoring the progress of the action plan along with oversight from the Director of Social Services. Both reported they recognised progress had been hampered by the significant workforce capacity issues, including the need for managers to be more operational to support children and families, rather than focussing on strategic development issues.

We found some files would have benefitted from greater management oversight to further support unregistered practitioners. The local authority must assure itself all practitioners undertaking assessments are suitably skilled, trained and qualified in undertaking assessments.

The local authority has introduced a quality assurance approach to identify areas for improvement and build on positive practice. The local authority is committed to identifying areas for improvement, and equally building on positive practice. Since the assurance check between 28 of June and 02 of July 2021, file audits have been completed which has assisted the service to identify gaps, prioritise risk and highlight where further monitoring is required. This work is ongoing with audit reports for collation, analysis and reporting purposes scheduled for the beginning of January 2022.

Prevention - To what extent the local authority is successful in promoting prevention and reducing need for increased or formal support from statutory agencies. Including taking all necessary steps to support the upbringing of the child by the child's family, and preventing a pattern of re-referrals?

We heard from the principal manager responsible for the early intervention and prevention service, of clear ambitions to identify additional support for children and families at the earliest opportunity. This includes the provision of information, advice and assistance and signposting to universal or targeted support services alongside consideration of people's own resources, and that available from families and communities. The local authority recognise greater resource is required to be able to identify additional support for children and families at the earliest opportunity and have utilised grant funding to expand capacity at the front door. The intention is that this will strengthen the local authority's ability to meet its

statutory responsibility to provide a range of preventative services. This is an area that we will revisit to assess the impact of this development on outcomes for children and families.

We found the preventative practice we reviewed varied in quality. The best examples enabled families to be fully supported at home. For example, support from the therapeutic team avoided the need for a child to come into the care of the local authority. However, we saw examples where children and families would have benefitted from practitioners undertaking more consistent critical thinking about the potential for harm to be repeated, contingency plans and the availability of wider support. The local authority must ensure that opportunities to support children and families are not missed or delayed.

Partnerships - To what extent are local authorities able to assure themselves opportunities for partnership working are positively exploited to maximise person centred planning, ensure integrated service delivery and drive service sustainability?

Parents spoken with referred positively to their relationship with practitioners and in relation to the support provided. However, we found some parents were unclear about the reasoning for the local authority's involvement. The local authority must ensure that parents are consistently clear on what is expected of them to achieve positive outcomes. Furthermore, there was lack of consistent evidence to demonstrate care and support plans and care and support protection plans were shared with children, families, and partners in a timely manner. Doing so would provide further clarity on reason for involvement, aims, outcomes and responsibilities.

The Care and Support Plan/Protection Plan must be co-produced with children and families to ensure there is an agreed understanding of how the needs will be met and personal outcomes achieved. The local authority must ensure that relevant copies are consistently shared with young people, families as well as other professionals.

At an operational level, on merit there is good communication between children's services and external partners. The quality of referral information provided by partners has clarity and relevant detail, which assists early decision-making.

The police and health representatives told us of the positive relationship they have with the local authority in relation to information sharing and joint working. Health representatives referenced the positive impact the recently established pre-birth meetings instigated by the local authority are having on children and families, providing clear opportunity to share information and plan timely intervention and support. Similarly, an education representative referenced how multi-agency panels in schools serve as a useful forum for sharing information to ensure that all partner agencies are sighted on children's needs and how they may be supported.

The local authority is committed to working strategically with partners to support children and families in their area. We heard from managers and practitioners how the local authority are working with regional partners using transformation grant to develop new services to provide timely and appropriate support to children and families. For example,

the Local Integrated Family Team established in January of this year with the local authority working strategically with a neighbouring local authority as well as Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board Trust to support parents. Children and families benefit from the input of staff from multiple disciplines and the approach and support is tailored to meet individual children and families' needs.

Well-being - To what extent the local authority is meeting its statutory duty to promote the well-being of children; ensuring protection of children from foreseeable harm, neglect and abuse and supporting families to achieve positive outcomes that matter to them. Including timely step down of children from local authority care.

We found variable practice in how well the local authority was addressing the safety and well-being of children. We saw examples of children receiving a swift response in relation to safeguarding, and appropriate decisions made to escalate to child protection investigations. This included an understanding of risk and decision-making at the front door with prompt referral on to the intake team with evidence of further analysis of risk and consistent decision making at that point. Strategy discussions and meetings are always held with the police. The local authority needs to ensure it considers involving other practitioners especially when they are involved with the child or the professional making the report. This is essential to support with robust decision-making.

We also saw some files where opportunities to be assured about children's safety were missed, and in others there was a lack of recording about how the risks had been addressed. Safeguarding practice following the initial intervention stage was often fragmented with important elements of safety missing.

In order to comply with the social care code of practice and legal requirements the local authority must improve file recording to evidence management of risks to children's safety. Without this, the local authority cannot be assured these risks are being addressed effectively by the local authority.

It is acknowledged that due to the challenges associated with insufficient staffing, the local authority has prioritised immediate intervention when safeguarding children, but this has been to the detriment of engaging and spending time with children and families, and the recording of vital information. Managers told us they are clear this practice should not continue in the longer term but emphasised the fine balance of supporting staff and not placing further pressures on an already fragile workforce. The local authority must increase the workforce in key positions to meet its statutory responsibilities. The local authority must review how it monitors and addresses key safeguarding practice areas.

Method:

- we reviewed documentation supplied in advance of our visit
- we spoke with 4 parent/carers and one young person
- we reviewed 37 case files
- we spoke with 5 representatives of partner agencies to include education, police and health

- we observed an intake managers meeting, a performance improvement meeting, a strategy meeting
- we spoke with practitioners, managers and senior managers

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.

During our next performance review period (2022–2023), 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.

We would like to extend our thanks to all those who helped with the arrangements for this follow up inspection and to those people and staff who spoke with us.

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Yours sincerely,



Lou Bushell-Bauers

Head of Local Authority Inspection

Care Inspectorate Wales