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Statutory Director of Social Services
Wrexham County Borough Council

Dyddiad / Date: 10/01/2024

Dear Director,

Improvement Check visit to Wrexham County Borough Council adult and children's services

1. Introduction

This letter describes the findings of the Improvement Check visit to Wrexham County Borough Council (WCBC) between 24 October 2023 – 02 November 2023. This was the children and adult Improvement Check following the Performance Evaluation Inspection (PEI) in June 2022.

We carry out inspection activity in accordance with the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014; key lines of enquiry; and the quality standards in the *Code of Practice in relation to the performance and improvement of social services in Wales*. This helps us determine the effectiveness of local authorities in supporting, measuring and sustaining improvements for people and in services.

The Improvement Check focused on the progress made in the following areas identified for improvements during our PEI in June 2022:

Principle	Areas of improvement identified from PEI in June 2022	Progress identified at improvement check.
People	<p>Children's Services: Children's views need to be consistently sought and appropriately recorded.</p> <p>A sufficient, qualified, and competent workforce to meet statutory duties.</p> <p>Quality of supervision, management oversight and support.</p>	<p>Improvements made and must be sustained.</p> <p>Some improvements made; further action is required.</p> <p>Some improvements made; further action is required.</p>

People	<p>Adult Services: Meeting carers needs and explicitly offering carers assessments in line with statutory duties.</p> <p>Quality assurance systems and performance information need to be developed.</p> <p>Improvements in the quality of supervision, management oversight and support.</p>	<p>Some improvements made; further action is required.</p> <p>Some improvements made; further action is required.</p> <p>Some improvements made; further action is required.</p>
Prevention	<p>Children's Services: Focus on prevention/early intervention; ensuring people receive the right support at the right time and cases are not closed too soon.</p>	<p>Improvements made and must be sustained.</p>
Prevention	<p>Adult Services: Provision of information, advice, and assistance (IAA).</p> <p>Timeliness of assessments and a sustainable model of delivery embedded to assist people to live independent.</p>	<p>Some improvements made; further action is required.</p> <p>Some improvements made; further action is required.</p>
Well-being	<p>Children's Services: Ensure all assessments address all five key areas of assessments.</p> <p>Recording practice in relation to sibling groups.</p>	<p>Improvements made and must be sustained.</p> <p>Some improvements made; further action required.</p>
Well-being	<p>Adult Services: The five key elements of assessments are captured, and eligibility addressed in line with statutory guidance.</p>	<p>Some improvements made; further action required.</p>
Partnership	<p>Children's Services:</p>	

	Consistent use of robust thresholds by all partners to support children, young people, and their families.	Improvements made and must be sustained.
Partnership	Adult Services: Practitioners developing professional working relationships – co-production.	Improvements made and must be sustained.

2. Summary

- Senior managers and lead members have introduced a new culture of raised expectations and standards in social care in WCBC. There is a strong leadership team within social services and in September 2022 the Executive Board agreed to expand the scope of the Children’s Accelerated Improvement Board to include a focus on improvements in adults as well as children’s services, forming a Joint Social Care Improvement Board. The board has made a positive impact through improved oversight of both adult and children’s services and compliance with the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and ensuring there is sufficient scrutiny and information about performance.
- Practitioners are positive about their experience of working for the local authority. Morale is generally good, and staff describe feeling valued and said managers are supportive and accessible. Positive feedback was received from staff with most of the staff who responded from children’s and adult services saying they feel supported by colleagues and managers to do their job.
- Managers spoke highly of the leadership programme commissioned by the local authority to support managers/leaders to develop their skills including the development of team culture and practice, performance management, quality assurance and coaching and mentoring. These skills are important in driving forward improvements plans and supporting managers particularly during times of workforce pressures, increased workforce anxiety and significant change.
- Senior managers are aware of the importance of access to early intervention to mitigate the need for statutory services and are focused on building and promoting people’s own strengths and resilience in line with the principles of the 2014 Act. During the improvement check we found clear evidence of improvements and progress made in many areas resulting in better outcomes for people.

- Despite these improvements, senior managers are clear the journey of improvement across adult and children's services is still a major priority for the local authority. Especially within children's services, where the fragility of the workforce position remains a significant risk to the local authority achieving and sustaining improvements. Ensuring continued corporate and political support is important as there remain key areas where action is needed to ensure the local authority is meeting its statutory responsibilities and making a positive difference to the well-being outcomes of the people of Wrexham.

3. Key findings and evidence

Key findings and some examples of evidence are presented below in line with the four principles of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014.

People – Children's Services

Strengths

- Action has been taken to ensure the voice of the child is consistently sought and listened to and consideration is given to the lived experience of the child. We saw parts of assessments, reviews and record of visits written directly to the child/young person, acknowledging the child's wishes and explaining in child-friendly language the outcome and decisions made. **This is positive practice; further work is required to ensure this practice is further embedded and a consistent approach taken across the service.**
- Performance information and quality assurance audits continue to drive improvements in children's services. The local authority has a process in place for auditing files providing senior leaders and managers with an accurate insight into practice and the opportunity to learn from emerging themes.

Areas for Improvement

- Recruitment, retention, and workforce well-being is a priority for the local authority. Significant action has been taken to address the recruitment and retention issues for example marketing campaign, and the commitment to the "grow our own" approach and sponsoring employees to study for a BA Degree in Social Work. Despite the action taken by the local authority, the workforce position remains fragile. There is a high number of agency staff being used to fill gaps in some teams, including some managements posts. **The local authority must continue to work towards ensuring a sufficient and sustainable workforce, with the capacity and capability to consistently meet statutory responsibilities.**
- The local authority recently launched a new supervision policy and most practitioners reported receiving regular supervision from managers. However, the supervision files viewed varied in content and quality, and we found

inconsistent use across children's services of the templates provided within the supervision policy. **The local authority should ensure supervision is provided to all practitioners in line with the supervision policy and appropriately recorded in supervision schedule.**

- Whilst parents/carers of disabled children are given the opportunity to tailor and manage their own support through the use of direct payments, the recruitment of personal assistants is a challenge. **The local authority must ensure practitioners consistently explore with parents/carers the different models and ways support can be provided to ensure the arrangements they have in place are effective, responsive to their requirements and are person-centred.**
- **Further work is required to ensure support services and short break options are available to support parents/carers of disabled children.**

People – Adult Services

Strengths

- Overall, people's voices are heard, their choices respected, and many people routinely achieved self-identified outcomes.
- As in children's services, recruitment and retention continues to be a priority for adult services. Positive work has been undertaken to improve career progression in adult services as well as a commitment to "grow our own" approach and sponsoring employees to study for a BA Degree in Social Work or BA Degree in Occupational Therapy.

Areas for Improvement

- The local authority is committed to supporting carers and is aware of the need to be able to demonstrate the impact of this work. We saw some good practice, but practitioners were not always clear if carers assessments had been undertaken by the third sector, and if so, what the outcomes were. **The local authority must ensure the voice of carers is always heard, and a consistent practice in offering and undertaking of assessments as well as a greater focus on ensuring opportunities to support carers are not missed or delayed.**
- A new supervision policy was recently launched, and most practitioners reported receiving regular supervision from managers. However, the supervision files viewed varied in content and quality. **The local authority must ensure robust management oversight of practice and reflective conversations are taking place with sufficient information noted to evidence decision making and agreed actions have been completed.**
- Since the PEI, the local authority has developed quality assurance systems and performance information resulting in some positive developments in practice in adult services. This is a priority area for senior managers who recognise the need to ensure managers have improved sight on front line

practice and decision making and ways of assuring themselves that care and support is safe and effective. **The local authority must ensure quality assurance systems and performance information is strengthened further and fully embedded across adult services.**

- Whilst there was evidence of people being supported by informal advocates to participate in assessments and decisions which affect them, we are not assured the need for advocacy is considered consistently by all practitioners. **The local authority must ensure the importance of advocacy is understood by all practitioners and formal advocacy is commissioned, offered, and provided when required.**

Prevention – Children’s Services

Strengths

- Decision making in the children single point of access team (SPOA) is overall timely with most referrals dealt with efficiently and proportionately. Actions often include analysis of chronologies to support decision making alongside comprehensive communication with other professionals to share and gather information. SPOA practitioners ensure clear lines of communication with professionals where a contact did not progress, or actions were assigned to someone/organisation other than social services.
- Children’s care and support/protection plans are mostly reviewed through regular, well-attended core groups and child in need meetings. Many families benefit from access to a broad range of services, including specialist drug, alcohol, and mental health support. There is also a broad range of help for children exposed to domestic abuse.
- Focusing on prevention and early intervention and other initiatives such as support for special guardians contributed to the reduction seen in the number of children looked after. Another area of positive practice is the reduction seen over the last 12 months in the number of children on the child protection register.

Areas for improvement

- In common with other local authorities in Wales, WCBC is experiencing pressure in relation to sufficiency of appropriate registered placements for children looked after. At the time of the improvement check there were no children placed in unregistered services. WCBC has plans in place to increase the sufficiency of residential provision as well as expanding its fostering service. **The local authority must ensure children are not placed in unregistered services and must continue its efforts to identify suitable, registered placements.**

Prevention – Adult Services

Strengths

- Since the PEI, the local authority has undertaken a review of SPOA and developed a business case outlining its plans to redesign the front door of adult services. This is a positive development with some improvements seen in the timeliness of SPOA assessments.
- Some **positive developments implemented** to address waiting lists and to ensure a sustainable model of delivery is embedded to assist people to live independently. An example is the guide developed by Occupational Therapists 'Guide to help with bathing and equipment.' The guide provides information and advice on how people can promote their independence and ensure their own safety.
- At the time of the PEI, similar to other local authorities in Wales, there was substantial pressures on capacity within the domiciliary care market in Wrexham. We found this situation has improved with extra capacity provided by the independent sector enabling the local authority to provide timely domiciliary care and support to most people, who require it. **People are supported to return home from hospital in a timely manner and the importance of timely hospital discharge is understood and remains a priority for the local authority.**

Areas for Improvement

- The local authority **must continue to work towards ensuring people receive information advice and assistance in line with the 2014 Act.**
- The timeliness of occupational therapy assessments and support has improved but further improvements are required. **Senior managers must continue to focus on the need to ensure waiting lists are reduced and a sustainable model of delivery is embedded to assist people to live independently.**
- We saw very little evidence of multi-disciplinary discussions about opportunities for reablement, assistive technology or less restrictive alternatives to residential care. This may be partly due to the lack of availability of reablement support, which the local authority recognises. **The local authority is working towards strengthening its reablement service and must ensure opportunities for preventative work are not missed.**
- In some of the social care records we reviewed we found an over reliance on care/support packages with insufficient exploration of preventative support to maximise people's independence and support people to achieve their personal outcomes. **Practitioners must be supported to explore creative and bespoke solutions to make more effective use of all available resources and to ensure people are receiving the right care/support at the right time.**

Well-being – Children’s Services

Strengths

- The social services emergency duty team provides a timely and proportionate response to emergencies that occur outside of normal opening hours to ensure the safety and well-being of children and young people.
- In many of the social care records we reviewed the response to the risk of significant harm was found to be timely and effective. The section 47 assessments seen demonstrated good information gathering and evidence of children seen/seen alone as appropriate.
- Many of the assessments we reviewed were strength based and explored the five key elements well. This demonstrated both a wider understanding of family context and a focus on risk. We saw use of chronologies and historical information being used to inform decision making and assessments.
- Ensuring contact between children and family members continues to be a priority for the local authority. In one case we saw positive practice by a social worker who organised and facilitated family time for a large sibling group.
- There have been significant improvements in many of the performance indicators in relation to compliance with statutory timeframes, including initial child protection conferences, child protection reviews and children looked after reviews.

Areas for improvement

- In one of the social care records we reviewed we saw considerable drift and delay and lack of safety planning, due to the allocated worker being off work unexpectedly. **The local authority should review its arrangements to ensure it has robust arrangements to monitor the workloads of practitioners when they are absent from work.**
- We saw some improvements in the recording practice in relation to sibling groups. Further work should be undertaken to ensure the strengths and /or support of each child is easier to identify within social care records.

Well-being – Adult Services

Strengths

- As seen in previous activity, in adult safeguarding we saw timely and proportionate response to safeguarding reports. The reports are screened, and the enquiries conducted within statutory requirements with analysis and determination clearly recorded with focus on ensuring people are safe and their well-being is promoted.
- Most people’s voices are heard, and their personal outcomes are captured. We saw some detailed and comprehensive biographies and personal circumstances evidencing what matters to people.

- Following the PEI, the local authority recognised further work was required to ensure all practitioners in adult services are working to the four principles of the 2014 Act and this is consistently reflected in the assessments and care and support plans. Refresher training was commissioned and provided to all practitioners and managers. Documentation is being reviewed to ensure compliance with statutory requirements.

Areas for Improvement

- Further work is required to ensure assessments are consistently strength based and there is exploration of community-based assets and sources of support. We recognise the lack of detail could be partly due to the structure of the forms, however, **further work must be undertaken to ensure practitioners are supported to have strength-based conversations, and the five key elements of assessments and eligibility are addressed consistently in line with statutory guidance.**

Partnerships – Children’s Services

Strengths

- In most of the social care records we reviewed we saw evidence of practitioners developing a professional working relationship with people built upon co-operation and shared understanding of what matters. During one of the tracking interviews the young person was very positive about her relationship with her social worker and said, **“she listens and does stuff quickly”**.
- Managers and practitioners described well-established operational relationships with health, police, education, providers and the third sector and we saw a clear commitment to collaborative working.
- The SPOA arrangements have enabled practitioners from different sectors and services to be co-located and work together daily. This has clear benefits and we saw evidence of prompt sharing of information across different agencies enabling swift responses when there are concerns about children’s safety or well-being. In the same way the views of relevant practitioners are clearly taken into consideration in assessment and care planning.
- The local authority has worked hard to ensure a shared understanding of thresholds and access to services. Since the PEI the threshold guidance has been reviewed and is now known as ‘Getting it right for families, right support-right time’. The guidance outlines and provides examples of different levels of presenting needs across the spectrum and supports practitioners and managers to make decisions around protecting and promoting the welfare of children and young people. A multi-agency workshop was recently held with all key partners. **We saw consistent use of thresholds with evidence they are understood by partners and saw examples of threshold being explained to families.**

Partnerships – Adult Services

Strengths

- In most of the social care records we reviewed we saw evidence of practitioners developing professional working relationships with people built upon co-operation and shared understanding of what matters.
- In partnership with Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board and the Association of Voluntary Organisations in Wrexham the local authority is focused on prevention and managing demand. A good example of this is the well-being hub in the centre of Wrexham delivering community-based health and social care preventative and well-being activity.

Areas for Improvements

- We saw some examples of people being discharged from hospital to step down beds in the community. In one case this was to enable family/unpaid carer to prepare the home environment and identify carers. **The local authority must ensure members of multi-disciplinary teams share information in a timely manner and continue to support people to focus on what needs to change.** When environmental issues are identified as a barrier, it is essential the barriers are identified and addressed in a timely manner to avoid any further delay in enabling people to return home in accordance with their wishes.
- We saw a small number of examples where agreed care and support arrangements had been significantly changed by the external provider without any evidence of consultation with the local authority. **The local authority should review current arrangements to ensure they are made aware of changes to care and support arrangements and providers are clear of the expectations on them.** This is essential to ensure people's changing needs are recognised and addressed at the earliest opportunity.

Next Steps

CIW expects the local authority to consider the areas identified for improvement and take appropriate action to address and improve these areas. CIW will monitor progress through its ongoing performance review activity with the local authority. Where relevant we expect the local authority to share the positive practice identified with other local authorities, to disseminate learning and help drive continuous improvement in statutory services throughout Wales.

5. Methodology

Fieldwork

- Most inspection evidence was gathered by reviewing the experiences of 50 people through review and tracking of their social care records. We reviewed 38 social care records and tracked 12.
- Tracking a person's social care record includes having conversations with the person in receipt of social care services, their family or carers, key worker, the key worker's manager, and where appropriate, other professionals involved.
- We engaged, through interviews, with four people receiving services and/or their unpaid carer.
- We engaged, through interviews with 28 local authority employees this included social workers and team managers.
- We reviewed a sample of staff supervision files.
- We reviewed supporting documentation sent to CIW for the purpose of the inspection.
- We administered surveys to local authority social services staff, and people.

Our Privacy Notice can be found at <https://careinspectorate.wales/how-we-use-your-information>.

6. Welsh Language

The inspection team included a Welsh speaking inspector, enabling CIW to make the active offer of conducting part of the inspection process in Welsh.

The active offer was not required on this occasion. This is because the local authority informed us that people taking part did not wish to contribute to this improvement check in Welsh.

7. Acknowledgements

CIW would like to thank staff, partners and people who gave their time and contributed to this inspection.

Yours Sincerely,



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

8. Glossary

Term	What we mean in our reports and letters
Must	Improvement is deemed necessary in order for the local authority to meet a duty outlined in legislation, regulation or code of practice. The local authority is not currently meeting its statutory duty/duties and must take action.
Should	Improvement will enhance service provision and/or outcomes for people and/or their carer. It does not constitute a failure to meet a legal duty at this time; but without suitable action, there is a risk the local authority may fail to meet its legal duty/duties in future.
Positive practice	Identified areas of strength within the local authority. This relates to practice considered innovative and/or which consistently results in positive outcomes for people receiving statutory services.
Prevention and Early Intervention	A principle of the 2014 Act which aims to ensure that there is access to support to prevent situations from getting worse, and to enhance the maintenance of individual and collective well-being. This principle centres on increasing preventative services within communities to minimise the escalation of critical need.
Voice and Control	A principle of the 2014 Act which aims to put the individual and their needs at the centre of their care and support, and giving them a voice in, and control over, the outcomes that can help them achieve well-being and the things that matter most to them.
Well-being	A principle of the 2014 Act which aims for people to have well-being in every part of their lives. Well-being is more than being healthy. It is about being safe and happy, having choice and getting the right support, being part of a strong community, having friends and relationships that are good for you, and having hobbies, work or learning. It is about supporting people to achieve their own well-being and measuring the success of care and support.
Co-Production	A principle of the 2014 Act which aims for people to be more involved in the design and provision of their care and support. It means organisations and professionals working with them and their family, friends and carers so their care and support is the best it can be.
Multi-Agency working	A principle of the 2014 Act which aims to strengthen joint working between care and support organisations to make

	sure the right types of support and services are available in local communities to meet people's needs. The summation of the Act states that there is a requirement for co-operation and partnership by public authorities.
What matters	'What Matters' conversations are a way for professionals to understand people's situation, their current well-being, and what can be done to support them. It is an equal conversation and is important to help ensure the voice of the individual or carer is heard and 'what matters' to them