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Dyddiad / Date: 16/04/2025

Dear Director,

Improvement Check visit to Denbighshire Local Authority - Children's Services

This letter describes the findings of the Improvement Check visit to children's services (the service) in Denbighshire County Council between 17 and 19 of February 2025. This followed the Joint Inspection of Child Protection Arrangements (JICPA) in February 2023.

1. Introduction

We carry out inspection activity in accordance with the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014(the Act); 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 focussed on the progress made in the following areas identified for improvements during the JICPA.

Principle	Areas of improvement identified from JICPA in 2023	Progress identified at Improvement Check

People	Advocacy must be strengthened to improve opportunity for children's views to be represented.	Some improvements made – further action required.
	The workforce's stability and capacity must be improved to meet statutory responsibilities.	Some improvements made – further action required.
Prevention	Improved support for, and communication with, family members and carers, is required.	Some improvements made – further action required.
Well-being	<p>The Wales Safeguarding Procedures must be implemented consistently.</p> <p>Clearer analysis of risk and rationale to support decisions is required. Monitoring of progress of care and support protection plans must be strengthened.</p> <p>Strengths-based practice and a focus on protective factors in children's lives must improve.</p> <p>Managerial oversight to support front line practice across the service, to include at the 'front door', must improve.</p>	<p>Some improvements made – further action required.</p> <p>Some improvements made – further action required.</p> <p>Some improvements made – further action required.</p> <p>Some improvements made – further action required.</p>
Partnership	<p>Communication with partner agencies must strengthen in relation to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensuring invites are routinely sent to key meetings held in line with the Wales Safeguarding Procedures 	<p>Some improvements made – further action required.</p> <p>Some improvements made – further action required.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sharing of outcomes of 'duty to report' received, as well as minutes and documentation of key meetings. 	Some improvements made – further action required.
	The service must support partner agencies' understanding of risk.	Some improvements made – further action required.

2. Glossary of Terminology and Quantity Definitions

A glossary of terminology is contained in Appendix one and a table of quantity definitions in Appendix two.

3. Summary of Improvement Check Findings

3.1 Children's services are experiencing ongoing pressures in terms of increase in demand and complexities of need of children and families, against a backdrop of challenging financial times.

3.2 The service has progressed from its position in 2023, supported by consistent and supportive leaders working with practitioners and managers. Managers are visible and approachable, and this instils a trusting, non-judgemental and learning culture.

3.3 Practitioners feel well supported by both leaders and colleagues.

3.4 Recruitment and retention of staff has been, and continues to be, a challenge. However, there is a core of permanent long-term staff in post to deliver a service supporting longer term stability. Despite staffing challenges, there is greater stability in some teams supported by agency workers. This means caseloads in some teams have reduced, and the workload is more manageable.

3.5 There is a focus on effective partnership working to address the complex presenting needs of children and young people. The importance of an effective integrated offer of support is a priority for leaders.

3.6 Improvements have been made at the 'front door' with greater oversight of recording of rationale and decision making. There continues however to be significant pressure in this area.

3.7 Whilst leaders are aware of the progress made, they are also aware that further improvements are required. There is corporate and political support for children's

services, and it is imperative this support continues, to ensure the local authority continues to drive improvements and meets its statutory responsibilities.

4. 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

Strengths

4.1 Leaders are experienced, provide stability of leadership and practitioners describe them as visible, approachable, and supportive.

4.2 Leaders value practitioners' dedication, and practitioners spoken with clearly know the people they support very well. They have a thorough understanding of the needs and circumstances of the people they support.

4.3 There is a positive and healthy culture within the service, supported by an open-door approach and significant focus on how best to support practitioners and managers. Managers do also provide constructive challenge where required.

4.4. Practitioners are clear there are opportunities to reflect on practice. All practitioners/managers (who completed the staff survey) agreed or strongly agreed that supervision is reflective. However, there is limited evidence in supervision records of the focus on reflective practice. **The local authority should ensure supervision records consistently capture the focus on reflective practice.**

4.5 Practitioners have opportunities to develop and benefit from external training provision as well as internal opportunities such as monthly reflective case discussions with peers and/or managers.

4.6 It is positive some teams in the service have stabilised because of changes in structures, with the commissioning of agency workers and through creating additional capacity. The local authority has also continued with its recruitment efforts and there are improved career progression pathways to encourage retention, to include greater investment in 'Growing Your Own'. It is positive that recruitment of children's services practitioners does not currently have any restrictions, reflecting corporate and political support for the demand led service. Equally they benefit from Human Resources specialist support.

Areas for Improvement

4.7 The service offers formal advocacy for children and parents, although the recording of the offer is variable. We saw a few recent examples whereby children and parents were not provided with formal advocacy in a timely manner. The regional contract limits formal advocacy for parents in the child protection arena to three sessions, with mechanisms to extend support when needed. Practitioners have an inconsistent understanding of these limitations, which could affect the provision of advocacy services. The local authority has requested the commissioning team review the commissioned advocacy contracts and examine instances where the service has not been provided in a timely manner. **The local authority should demonstrate more clearly that it is meeting its statutory duty in terms of offering advocacy and must ensure commissioning arrangements are responsive to people's needs.**

4.8 Recruitment of staff continues to challenge the local authority particularly for key positions in certain teams. There are some service areas which face challenges in consistently meeting statutory responsibilities in a timely way. Recruitment and retention of staff continues to be on the local authority's corporate risk register, ensuring it is given sufficient priority. **The local authority must continue with its efforts to ensure a sufficient and sustainable workforce, with the capacity and capability to consistently meet its statutory responsibilities.**

Prevention

Strengths

4.9 Family members and carers told us of the benefits of the local authority therapeutic team. Notably in terms of helping parents and grandparents to understand a child's lived experience and how different behaviours impact children. **The use of Video Reality to promote positive parenting behaviours is an example of innovative and positive practice.**

4.10 There are opportunities for family members and carers to explore potential support through Family Group Conference (FGC). The conference is led by family members to plan and make decisions for children whom professionals have expressed concerns and who may also be at risk. It is an opportunity to build on a family's strengths, to empower them to understand wider concerns, and to take ownership of keeping children safe. **There are examples of this forum being routinely used which is positive practice.**

4.11 Training for foster carers is provided in house and foster carers praised the quality of the varied training available. This enables carers to get to know the whole of the fostering team and provides opportunities for them to become familiar with other foster carers who form a support network for them. There are drop in facilities

for carers in Rhyl which foster carers/ carers can easily access whilst children attend contact sessions. Foster carers stated, “*Denbighshire social services have always been on hand when needed by us as foster carers.*” They also told us they feel supported and speak positively about the support available. They know who to contact if they need anything, and the support is tailored to their individual circumstances. There are also designated roles to support carers who care for children under a Special Guardianship Order.

4.12 The local authority conducts various audits, reviews quarterly data and holds bi-weekly performance meetings to oversee the standard of practice. Quality assurance work undertaken by the Independent Reviewing Officers brings independent rigour. Checklists are completed to support oversight of practice relating to initial and review child protection case conferences and children looked after reviews. Checklists are reviewed and analysed on a quarterly basis. **Themes are then considered and recommendations made which is good practice.**

4.13 The local authority provides collaborative conversation training to staff to promote strengths and outcome-based practice. There are examples of this approach being adopted to work with families, although the practice needs to be more consistent with records reflecting a more collaborative than instructive approach. Elements of the Signs of Safety approach is utilised in case conferences to support focus on risks and protective factors for children.

4.14 Improvements have been made at the ‘front door’ with greater oversight of recording of rationale and decision making. This part of the service has faced significant challenges due to vacancies and sickness. Positively, there has been a service wide approach to support improvements at the ‘front door’ whilst efforts have been made to recruit to the team.

Areas for Improvement

4.15 Due to the increase in demand and staffing challenges faced, the quality of social care records, and the timeliness of when they are uploaded to Paris (data recording system) has been impacted. Similarly, whilst practitioners in discussions can evidence that they know children and families well, this is not always represented in their records. Whilst there are quality assurance practices in place informed by a quality assurance framework, there are areas of practice which would benefit from greater oversight, analysis, and auditing. There are also pockets of data capturing and monitoring, which potentially could be more service wide. **The local authority should review their quality assurance framework to enable greater scrutiny of both qualitative and quantitative data to drive forward service improvements and ensure managers have further oversight of front-line practice.**

4.16 Despite the improvements at the ‘front door,’ and a triage system in place to allocate work according to priority of need and safety, delays are still evident. This

could lead to an escalation of needs, albeit numbers are reducing. This therefore is an area that requires additional focus to ensure the workload becomes more manageable, and to consistently ensure a timely flow of cases between teams and early intervention services. **The local authority must continue to work towards ensuring a sustainable model of delivery is embedded at the front door to assist people to receive timely information, advice, and assistance.**

Well-being

Strengths

4.17 Child protection conferences and children looked after (CLA) reviews are mostly timely.

4.18 Social work reports are mostly shared with parents in a timely way prior to conferences. Parents and where appropriate, children, are given the opportunity to speak with chairpersons to share their views.

4.19 There are examples of children being seen and spoken with alone where appropriate with their voices being prominent in s47 enquiries completed. Equally there are examples of family members views being sought and clearly recorded to contribute to the assessment of risk to children.

4.20 s47 enquiries are allocated and undertaken in a timely way and are comprehensive. The s47 enquiries conclude with an informed decision that the child is or is not at continuing risk of significant harm.

4.21 Progress has been made in that there is evidence of management oversight to support and guide practice, although this is more apparent in some records than others. **The local authority must ensure this oversight continues across all teams and areas to promote best and compliant practices.**

Areas for Improvement

4.22. There are a few examples whereby a child was not seen and their opinion not considered during a part 3 assessment. Also, where children were not seen promptly after making an allegation of physical abuse. **The local authority must consistently ensure that all children are seen in line with required timescales as noted in the Wales Safeguarding Procedures, and during assessments held in line with Part 3 of 'the Act'.**

4.23 Care and support and care and support protection plans do not consistently reference the views of the child and family members. The local authority must ensure that their views are strengthened in plans to ensure they are child and person centred in line with expectations of Part 4 of 'the Act' ([part-4-code-of-practice-meeting-needs.pdf](#)).

4.24 There are examples of risks to children being appropriately considered, with clear rationale for decisions made about children's safety. However, this practice is not always consistent. Additionally, we saw a few examples whereby the risk for the named child was unclear as records were overly focused on the risk for their sibling. **The local authority must ensure records sufficiently clarify decisions about children's safety and are focused on named children, not lost in focus on a sibling.**

4.25 There are excellent examples of pre-birth assessments, although more generally assessments are often imprecise with limited analysis. Whilst they identify risks, more precise analysis is required including clarity about the impact of risks on the child. This would provide opportunity to better inform the care and support protection plans. Care and support protection plans are often task focussed, with limited or unclear links being made between the required action/tasks and the expectation of how this will reduce or eliminate the risk to children. **The local authority must ensure there is improved analysis of risk, and specifically of the impact of risks on a child, in social care records along with clarification about what needs to change to ensure the child's safety.**

4.26 Core group minutes are often updates of the situation rather than an evaluation of the effectiveness of the care and support protection plan in reducing the risk of significant harm to children. **The local authority must ensure core group minutes consistently review actions undertaken and reflect the extent to which they have contributed to improving the lived experience of the child and protected them from harm.**

4.27 We saw some examples whereby care and support plans were based on s47 enquiries only. Relying solely on a s47 enquiry rather than an assessment under Part 3 of 'the Act' might mean opportunities are missed to obtain information about the five key elements of an assessment ([part-3-code-of-practice-assessing-the-needs-of-individuals.pdf](#)). **The local authority must assure itself that care and support plans have been compiled based on assessments which include the five key elements.**

Partnerships

Strengths

4.28 Strategy discussions are held daily (Monday to Friday) with consistent practitioners from police, probation, and education participating. **This is positive practice.** It is also noted that the local authority continues with their efforts in relation to having a health representative from Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board at the daily strategy discussions. We also saw examples whereby a range of representatives were present at strategy discussions/meetings improving

communication between agencies and providing greater details about risks to children.

4.29 There is a strong working relationship between children's and education services as both are under the same directorate, are regarded as one service and have a one service plan. There is frequent and consistent communication both at operational and strategic level to benefit children and families.

4.30 Whilst there is evidence currently that person centred, and strengths-based approach is implemented when working with children and families, the practice is variable. The local authority has implemented elements of the Effective Child Protection (ECP) practice framework and has plans to fully implement this. To have a specific framework will support and improve clarity for practitioners across agencies about the requirements and expectations of operational practice. The framework provides focus on what needs to change and any strengths in place such as how the family and wider community can assist to promote children's safety. In the meantime, practitioners sporadically share their local threshold document with partners to support understanding about whether the risk of significant harm is sufficient to instigate the Wales Safeguarding Procedures, and children and families' eligibility for care and support. **The local authority should progress at pace with their plans to fully implement an extended model of practice to support front line practice, as well as fully support partner's understanding of risk.**

4.31 Conferences are effectively chaired to ensure parents understand the process. Chairs explain each step clearly and provide opportunities for parents to ask questions, supporting their understanding and engagement.

Areas for Improvement

4.32 We saw a few occasions whereby it would have been appropriate for the referrer to have attended the strategy discussion/meeting. We also heard from some practitioners that they are not consistently invited to attend strategy meetings for families they are involved with, even when their attendance would have been appropriate. **The local authority should consider inviting others to attend strategy meetings in line with the Wales Safeguarding Procedures to include the practitioner making the report and other appropriate practitioners such as the child's usual allocated social worker.**

4.33 We saw evidence people/practitioners/managers had been informed of the outcome of referrals they made in line with their duty to report, however this practice is variable. Practitioners informed us they are not consistently able to meet this statutory requirement due to capacity and the increase in referrals. **The local authority must communicate information about duty to report outcomes in a timely manner to the person who made the initial report in line with Wales Safeguarding Procedures.**

5. 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.

6. Methodology

Fieldwork

- Most inspection evidence was gathered by reviewing the experiences of 34 people through review and tracking of their social care record. We reviewed 30 social care records and tracked four.
- 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 and/or focus groups, with four people receiving services and/or their carer.
- We engaged, through interviews and/or focus groups with 18 local authority employees and elected members (this included social workers, social care practitioners, team managers, service managers, head of children's services, director of social services).
- We reviewed a sample of staff supervision files.
- We observed a review child protection case conference.
- We reviewed supporting documentation sent to CIW for the purpose of the inspection.
- We administered surveys to local authority social services staff, partner organisations and people.

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

7. Welsh Language

CIW is committed to providing an active offer of the Welsh language during its activity with local authorities.

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.

8. Acknowledgements

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

Yours sincerely,

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

Lou Bushell-Bauers

Head of Local Authority Inspection
Care Inspectorate Wales

Appendix 1

Glossary of Terminology

Term	What we mean in our reports and letters
Must	Improvement is deemed necessary 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 act.
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 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 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 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 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 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.

Appendix 2

Quantity Definitions Table

Terminology	Definition
Nearly all	With very few exceptions
Most	90% or more
Many	70% or more
A majority	Over 60%
Half	50%
Around half	Close to 50%
A minority	Below 40%
Few	Below 20%
Very few	Less than 10%