

Craig Macleod  
Statutory Director of Social Services  
Flintshire County Council

**Date:** 11 September 2025

Dear Director,

## **Improvement Check visit to Flintshire Children's Services**

This letter describes the findings of our Improvement Check (IC) visit to Flintshire Children's Services between 14 – 16 July 2025.

### **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 We carry out inspection activity in accordance with the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 (SSWBA 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.
- 1.2 This IC was to follow up progress made following our Performance Evaluation Inspection (PEI) in November 2023, in the following areas:

<b>No.</b>	<b>Principle</b>	<b>Area of improvement identified at PEI in November 2023</b>	<b>Progress at this Improvement Check</b>
1	People	An exit strategy for ending reliance on a commissioned managed agency team must be considered and implemented.	Improvements made and must be sustained

2	People	<p><b>Accommodation:</b>  <b>Young Care Leavers and relevant 16-17 year olds:</b> Appropriate housing options for young care leavers and relevant 16-17 year olds must be available. As far as possible, care leavers should not need to present as homeless.</p> <p><b>Disabled Children and Young People:</b>  As far as is reasonably practicable, accommodation must be provided to looked after and other accommodated children which is within the local authority area and meets their needs.</p>	<p>Some improvements made – further action required</p> <p>Some improvements made – further action required</p>
3	Prevention	The local authority should continue to monitor the effectiveness of services in delivering prompt, adequate support, to children who are neurodiverse or who are awaiting diagnosis of a potential neurodiverse condition, and their parents/carers.	Some improvements made – further action required
4	Wellbeing	Guidance should be shared more widely with relevant partners and stakeholders to ensure consistent and shared understanding of thresholds and information-sharing protocols.	Some improvements made – further action required
5	Wellbeing	<p><b>Implementation of the Wales Safeguarding Procedures (WSP):</b></p> <p><b>Section 47 Enquiries – Timeliness:</b> Must be completed within required timescales as stipulated within the WSP.</p> <p><b>Initial Child Protection Conferences (ICPC) – Timeliness:</b> Where safeguarding concerns are substantiated, and a child is judged to be experiencing or at risk of abuse, harm or neglect, an ICPC must be convened timely in line with the WSP.</p> <p><b>Section 47 Enquiries – Recording Outcomes:</b> A clear rationale for determinations made and next steps to be taken must be recorded following the</p>	<p>Some improvements made – further action required</p> <p>Some improvements made – further action required</p> <p>Improvements made and must be sustained</p>

		completion of section 47 enquiries in line with the WSP.	
6	Wellbeing	<p><b>Care and Support Protection Plans (CASP CP Plan):</b></p> <p>Outline plans devised at ICPC should be developed into a more detailed plan at first core group meeting, in line with the WSP.</p> <p>Subsequent core group meetings should specifically review progress of the plan in meeting the outcomes to promote a child's safety.</p> <p>Leaders should ensure practitioners, through clear systems and standards, are supported in developing plans which are child-centred and outcome-focused.</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>
7	Wellbeing	Information to promote a child's safety must be shared in a timely manner.	Improvements made and must be sustained
8	Partnership	Parents and/or carers must be involved as full partners in assessing the extent to which their personal outcomes can be met with the support of others who may be willing to provide support, or with assistance of services available within their community.	Some improvements made – further action required
9	Partnership	The local authority must communicate information about duty to report outcomes in a timely manner to the person who made the initial report.	Some improvements made – further action required
10	Partnership	Appropriate agencies must be invited to strategy discussions/meetings in line with the WSP, including the practitioners making the duty to report and practitioners from Education and community-based Healthcare services.	Improvements made and must be sustained

## 2. Glossary of Terminology and Quantity Definitions

2.1 A glossary of terminology is contained in Appendix 1 and a table of quantity definitions in Appendix 2.

### **3. Summary of Improvement Check Findings**

- 3.1 Leaders promote a positive culture through compassionate leadership, with a strong emphasis on workforce development. A passionate and well-supported workforce is in place to deliver services to children and families.
- 3.2 Efforts to improve accommodation options have reduced instances of homelessness among care leavers. The local authority continues to work with partners to support timely pathway planning and ensure suitable housing is available as young people transition to independence.
- 3.3 Challenges remain in meeting demand for overnight short-breaks for disabled children. Allocation oversight is maintained, and families are offered alternative support options.
- 3.4 Most children benefit from suitable local accommodation, but some with more complex care and support needs live outside of Flintshire, impacting choice and proximity to family and friends. The local authority understands its future placement needs and is working on a five-year development plan to improve provision.
- 3.5 Workforce pressures, particularly maintaining a consistent, qualified and competent team across children's services remain a concern for practitioners and managers. Leaders are aware of the issues and have taken steps to increase capacity and strengthen induction and development, though practice quality and consistency continue to be affected.
- 3.6 Frequent issues with the social care data recording system impacts practice quality and consistency and are of concern to practitioners. A new system is being planned, but the local authority must ensure data can still be effectively recorded in the meantime.
- 3.7 A variety of early help and prevention services are accessible to children and families, promoting positive outcomes. However, waiting lists for some services can impact the timeliness of support which children and families require. Some people are unaware of the range of support and services available, highlighting a need for strengthened communication and inter-agency coordination.
- 3.8 There is a strategic focus on identifying and responding to families in need earlier, supported by collaboration with partners to enhance local and regional services.

- 3.9 Direct payments promote choice and flexibility, but are not always reviewed in a timely way, especially when circumstances change. Strengthening review processes will help ensure they continue to meet people's wellbeing outcomes.
- 3.10 A revised front door structure has strengthened ability and capacity to manage service demand and meet statutory responsibilities. Updated threshold guidance, a safeguarding hub and a designated education line for schools are enhancing multi-agency understanding and decision-making. Internal workforce understanding regarding threshold documentation and eligibility for certain support services needs strengthening.
- 3.11 Timescales of section 47 enquiries and other meetings held in line with the Wales Safeguarding Procedures (WSP) are not consistently adhered to, and some initial responses to safeguarding concerns lack depth and consistency.
- 3.12 A new child protection practice framework is being implemented to improve child protection processes. Quality assurance has also been strengthened, supporting leader's oversight of practice across the service.
- 3.13 Strong multi-agency collaboration supports children's safety and wellbeing. Some aspects of practice require further strengthening, including consistently involving relevant professionals in strategy discussions and ensuring outcomes are communicated to referrers.

#### **4. Key Findings and Evidence**

Key findings and some examples of evidence are presented below in line with the four principles of the SSWBA 2014.

##### **People**

##### **Strengths**

- 4.1 Leaders promote a positive culture through compassionate leadership, with a strong emphasis on workforce development. A passionate and well-supported workforce is in place to deliver services to children and families. There is a clear focus on workforce development, with measures for strengthening engagement and communication. Examples include themed team learning and service development sessions, and a resilience project for enhancing lines of communication.
- 4.2 The workforce is passionate about delivering services to children and families. Practitioners feel well-supported by colleagues and managers. Overall, practitioners are appropriately supervised with opportunities for outcomes-

focused conversations with line managers. Clearer recording of actions taken to promote individual staff wellbeing would strengthen supervision records. 78 of 90 (87%) respondents to our practitioner survey would recommend working in Flintshire.

- 4.3 The service actively offers a service in Welsh, in line with the *More Than Just Words* framework<sup>1</sup>. A practice directive has been developed, to promote continuous staff awareness of the importance of upholding people's right to access services in the Welsh language.
- 4.4 A strong focus on improving accommodation has contributed to a recent reduction in homelessness among young people leaving care. Collaboration between Children's Services and Flintshire's Housing Support and Homelessness Service is supporting timely pathway planning. The refreshed Corporate Parenting Charter (2025–2028) outlines how the local authority will promote children's wellbeing, including through the provision of safe, stable accommodation. Practitioners are positive about the *When I'm Ready* scheme, which helps young people develop independent living skills and access continued accommodation beyond the age of 18. It is acknowledged some young people choose not to take up accommodation offered by the local authority.
- 4.5 Demand for overnight short-break provision exceeds capacity. The local authority oversees allocations and offers alternative support, such as evening and daytime short-breaks and direct payments. A draft regional review of respite provision, supported by an action plan, will assess the use of overnight services and the impact of alternative support on children and families. While the review is regional, it has potential to inform the design and availability of local services.
- 4.6 Many children benefit from good-quality local placements. However, some are placed out of area because their needs cannot be met locally. The local authority has a clear understanding of the scale and types of care provision required, supported by its Placement Commissioning Strategy (2024–2028). Significant progress has been made in expanding in-house placements, with continued focus on further developing both fostering and residential provision to meet the needs of children looked after. **The local authority must continue its programme of work to ensure accommodation needs are met locally, in line with children's wishes and care and support needs. It must also continue efforts to ensure care leavers do not have to present as homeless and can access appropriate accommodation.**

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<sup>1</sup> More than just words is Welsh Government's strategic framework for promoting the Welsh language in health and social care. A link to the document can be found here: [More than just words \(gov.wales\)](https://gov.wales/more-than-just-words).

- 4.7 Practitioners have expressed concerns about workforce stability, noting that 2024 was particularly challenging. Managers have a comprehensive understanding of these challenges and have taken steps to address them. This includes hiring additional agency social workers and redesigning the 'front door' structure to enhance service response and quality. Leaders remain committed to ongoing recruitment and retention efforts, continuing successful initiatives such as the 'grow our own' strategy, which supports existing practitioners in becoming qualified social workers. Other measures include the revival of the Creed Campaign, a bespoke recruitment initiative, and ongoing close collaboration with the Workforce Development team.

### **Areas for Improvement**

- 4.8 The local authority no longer depends on commissioned managed agency teams, but there remains high reliance on individual agency social workers. While these workers can bring fresh perspectives and contribute positively to teams, there have been instances where they have left the service suddenly. This results in children and families experiencing frequent changes in social workers and having to retell their stories, which significantly impacts their ability to build trustful and consistent relationships. Additionally, concerns have been raised about some agency workers' limited understanding of Welsh legislation and the impact of their geographical distance from the local area, which can affect their ability to respond in emergencies.
- 4.9 A fragile workforce affects the local authority's ability to consistently meet its statutory requirements. This results in variability in quality and timeliness of assessments, care and support plans (CASPs), reviews, and transfer tasks when children and families transition between teams. **The local authority must continue efforts in ensuring a consistent, sufficient, qualified, and competent workforce to meet its statutory duties.**
- 4.10 Practitioners describe challenges accessing and inputting data into the social care data system, which significantly impacts their work. This affects their ability to undertake checks and record rationale for decision-making in a timely manner. It is acknowledged, like many other local authorities in Wales, Flintshire County Council has plans to transition to a new social care data system. Whilst it is anticipated this will bring positive changes, practitioners remain concerned about the current situation. We acknowledge the limitations in what the local authority is able to do whilst awaiting the new system. However, **the local authority must ensure data can be recorded and accessed to support effective decision-making, monitoring, and service performance.**

### **Prevention**

### **Strengths**

- 4.11 A range of early help and preventative options are available to support children and families, including children diagnosed with neurodiversity or children who are awaiting an assessment for a potential neurodiverse condition. This includes services through *Y Teulu Cyfan*, family group meetings, and various support groups for parents and children with additional needs (e.g. Daffodils, and STAND). The *Empowering Parents Empowering Communities (EPEC)* programme also supports parents to build their parenting skills and confidence.
- 4.12 Tailored support is available for children and families. For example, an adolescent strategy worker supports children and their families to prevent placement breakdown and can support teams across children's services. Their support is often tailored to meet children and families individual needs, to include children who have, or who are awaiting an assessment for, a neurodiverse condition. **This is positive practice.** Commissioned services such as Action for Children are regarded as a valuable resource providing tailored support to meet individual needs. In addition, they are accessible to provide support to practitioners. **This is positive practice.** However, there is often a waiting list for support services including the adolescent strategy worker and Action for Children. This means children and families do not always benefit from support in a timely manner. Deficits in support for disabled children and their families can have a significant impact on the experience of this group. **The local authority should continue its positive efforts in developing support and services available, in consultation with people, which addresses their needs in a timely way.**
- 4.13 The local authority is establishing a new group to support and strengthen community networks and social opportunities for young people and carer leavers who become new parents. **This is positive practice**, promoting early support and resilience within communities.
- 4.14 There is strategic focus on enhancing identification of children and families who may benefit from support sooner. The local authority is collaborating with Health partners, who hold information about children with a neurodiverse diagnosis or awaiting assessment, with an information-sharing protocol being developed. Links are being strengthened with Neurodiversity Wales, and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), with continued collaboration efforts to improve services regionally.

### **Areas for Improvement**

- 4.15 Direct payments are positively promoted, offering choice and flexibility in meeting needs. However, they are not always reviewed in a timely manner, including when circumstances change. Strengthening consistency in undertaking reviews will ensure this valuable support option remains effective in meeting peoples identified outcomes. It will further reduce the likelihood of the



local authority having to retrieve direct payment funds which have not been utilised. **The local authority must ensure direct payments are used effectively to meet people's assessed needs and outcomes, and any barriers to their use are identified and addressed through timely review.**

## **Well-being**

### **Strengths**

- 4.16 A revised 'front door' structure has supported positive change, with designated practitioners focused on screening and decision-making regarding section 47 enquiries. A RAG ('red, amber, green') tool has also been developed to support practitioners' decision-making, along with strengthened performance oversight. These have improved timeliness of enquiries and clarity of outcomes recorded.
- 4.17 Updated safeguarding threshold guidance has been shared with partners, which sits alongside a *framework of support* document. These documents strengthen shared understanding of thresholds for both care and support and safeguarding.
- 4.18 Child Protection Conference (CPC) Chairs facilitate regular sessions to support multi-agency threshold and decision-making understanding. An established safeguarding hub is further enhancing shared understanding of thresholds, along with children and family's eligibility for different support services. An education line has improved understanding of different thresholds and communication between children's services and schools. **This is positive practice.**
- 4.19 Children's voices are promoted within child protection and care and support planning processes. Whilst there are some inconsistencies regarding the extent children's voices and lived experiences are captured within records, there are good examples. These include individual children being able to share their views and wishes in both statutory visits, and visits by children's services assistants who undertake direct work with children. There are strong examples of children looked after reviews written directly to children, in a child-centred way. In another example, contact was maintained with a family via a mobile messenger app, supporting assurances about the child's safety. Person-centred approaches to engaging with children and families **is positive practice.**
- 4.20 Conference buddies engage with children directly to explore their wishes and feelings and represent these within conferences held in line with the WSP. **This is positive practice.**

- 4.21 The local authority is in the process of implementing the *Effective Child Practice Framework* to improve delivery and oversight of child protection processes and practices. Progress has been impacted by staffing capacity, but a new lead has been appointed to progress implementation from September 2025. The local authority is supporting the implementation of this framework with strengthened oversight and collaborative conversations training.
- 4.22 Improved management oversight and audit arrangements are supporting quality assurance of practice in children's services. Managers demonstrate regular case oversight, supporting clarity and direction for practitioners. 80 out of 90 (89%) respondents to our practitioner survey consider quality assurance is robust. The local authority is refreshing its quality assurance framework to better support and inform practice. A continued focus on quality oversight and improvement, particularly at the 'front door', will help drive continued learning and service improvements.

### **Areas for Improvement**

- 4.23 Despite positive progress promoting threshold understanding amongst partners, awareness and application of the *framework of support* document, threshold document, and RAG tool amongst the internal workforce is inconsistent. **The local authority should continue efforts embedding understanding and application of thresholds within its children's services workforce, as well as with external partners.**
- 4.24 In a few cases, responses to initial concerns were delayed and lacked sufficient rigour. This includes instances of children not being seen promptly, and insufficient information gathering to explore wider potential risks. **The local authority must ensure practitioners consistently consider and take any immediate action required to keep a child, and any other children who may be at risk, safe. This includes gathering further information where necessary and ensuring children are seen promptly and consistently.**
- 4.25 Core group (CG) meetings do not consistently reflect progress of a child's safety outcomes. Care and Support Protection Plans (CSPP) are not consistently outcome-focused, and the extent they are reviewed during CG meetings is variable. As a result, CSPPs may not always reflect current risks, needs and/or progress. The local authority has taken steps to improve practice by providing further training for professionals attending CGs, use of a designated minute-taker, and strengthening of quality oversight through audit activity. **The local authority must ensure CG meetings consistently monitor progress against the child's CSPP, and that the plan is updated as necessary to reflect the child's current needs and risks in accordance with the WSP.**

- 4.26 There are examples of practice not fully aligned with timescales set out in the WSPs, such as in relation to undertaking section 47 enquiries, arranging meetings and conferences. **The local authority must ensure it consistently adheres to the requirements of the WSP, maintains close oversight of performance and takes all reasonable steps to minimise any delays occurring.**

## **Partnership**

### **Strengths**

- 4.27 There are positive examples of children's services working effectively with partners strategically and operationally. This includes effective multi-agency information-sharing and commitment to collaborating in the interests of promoting children's safety and wellbeing. However, in very few instances practice could be strengthened through more timely consultation with relevant healthcare professionals to inform assessment and/or care planning.
- 4.28 There are positive examples of practitioners engaging with parents and/or carers to understand their wishes and needs. In one example there was good consideration of the stage a parent was at in terms of their motivation to make changes, informed by theoretical models of change. In another example, an interpreter was used to explain consent and to offer support regarding a parenting assessment.

### **Areas for Improvement**

- 4.29 The local authority has taken steps to improve consistency in relevant agencies being invited to strategy discussions/meetings. The Safeguarding Hub creates improved opportunity for multi-agency collaboration. However, evidence to show all key agencies, such as healthcare practitioners, are consistently invited to participate is variable. **The local authority should ensure all relevant agencies are consistently invited to strategy discussions/meetings.**
- 4.30 Practice in informing referrers of outcomes of reports made to children's services is inconsistent. The local authority has taken steps to improve this. A pilot programme is underway involving a part-time education worker, based in the Safeguarding Hub, supporting communication with schools. A revised feedback template for sending to report-makers has been developed. There is ongoing strategic focus on strengthening 'front door' performance and quality, including reviewing pathways to report outcomes. **The local authority must ensure it acknowledges receipt of reports and, where relevant, notify the report-maker of the decision-outcome, in line with section 3, part 1 WSP.**

## **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 people through review and tracking of their social care record. We reviewed 24 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 seven people receiving services and/or their carer.
- We engaged, through interviews and/or focus groups with 35 local authority employees (this included social workers, team managers, deputy team managers, operational managers, and heads of service).
- 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, 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. Inspection activity in Welsh was not required on this occasion as the local authority informed us people participating did not wish to contribute in the Welsh language.

## 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', with a stylized, cursive script.

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

## **Appendix 1**

### **Glossary of Terminology**

<b>Term</b>	<b>What we mean in our reports and letters</b>
<b>Must</b>	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.
<b>Should</b>	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.
<b>Positive practice</b>	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.
<b>Prevention and Early Intervention</b>	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 wellbeing. This principle centres on increasing preventative services within communities to minimise the escalation of critical need.
<b>Voice and Control</b>	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 wellbeing and the things that matter most to them.
<b>Wellbeing</b>	A principle of the Act which aims for people to have wellbeing in every part of their lives. Wellbeing 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 wellbeing and measuring the success of care and support.
<b>Co-Production</b>	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.

<b>Multi-Agency working</b>	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.
<b>What matters</b>	'What Matters' conversations are a way for professionals to understand people's situation, their current wellbeing, 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**

<b>Terminology</b>	<b>Definition</b>
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%