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Statutory Director of Social Services  
Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council

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Dear Director,

## **CIW Assurance Check Visit of Blaenau Gwent Children's Services**

This letter describes the findings of our assurance check (AC) visit of Blaenau Gwent children's services between 23 – 25 February 2026.

### **1 Introduction**

- 1.1 We carry out inspection activity in accordance with the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 ('The Act'); key lines of enquiry; and 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 We based our key lines of enquiry on the four principles of The Act and have recorded our findings in line with these, focused on:

#### **People – voice, choice and control**

- How well are people treated as equal partners who have voice, choice and control over their lives and can achieve what matters to them?
- To what extent does the workforce have sufficient numbers, relevant skills, experience and is supported?

#### **Prevention**

- How well is the need for care and support minimised, and escalation of need prevented whilst ensuring the best possible outcomes for people are achieved?

- How well are families supported to stay together, where safe and in the best interest of the child, through timely, strengths-based, and preventative approaches?

## **Wellbeing**

- How well are people protected and safeguarded from abuse and neglect and any other types of harm?
- To what extent is there good analysis of risk, protection plans, care and support plans in place, with action taken when necessary to safeguard children and young people from harm and promote their welfare?

## **Partnership**

- To what extent are there effective partnerships in place to commission and deliver fully integrated, high quality and sustainable outcomes for people?
- How well are people encouraged to be involved in designing and delivering their care, support and services they receive?

## **2 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 Assurance Check**

- 3.1 Children's services was undergoing a planned restructure at the time of the assurance check, to support longer term sustainability and strategic alignment. The workforce has been well engaged with the changes, supported by clear oversight and communication by leaders to maintain stability during transition.
- 3.2 There is a clear focus on children's voices, early help, safeguarding and partnership working which is delivering positive outcomes for children and families.
- 3.3 Leadership is visible and compassionate, underpinned by a dedicated workforce and clear practice framework. This promotes a culture where staff feel valued and trusted. A clear workforce strategy, including induction, supervision and training, supports a skilled and confident workforce, with audit, performance and senior oversight driving learning and improvement.
- 3.4 Stability and the co-location of some teams support continuity and allows practitioners to build trusted relationships with families and partners. Creative approaches to succession planning and retaining experienced staff help strengthen workforce resilience.

- 3.5 Children's voices are prioritised and reflected in practice, with advocacy support generally well embedded, supported by good awareness among practitioners and families.
- 3.6 Strengths-based practice is well established, with families routinely involved in assessment and planning, with plans reflecting what matters to them. Strong examples exist of children's views meaningfully informing assessments, safeguarding activity, and care planning, supported by creative practice approaches to help children engage and understand their lived experiences.
- 3.7 There is a strong service-wide commitment to prevention and early help, supported by clear pathways for timely decision-making and escalating or stepping down support when needed. Early identification of need helps prevent unnecessary escalation. However, limitations in some preventative and step-down services can affect progress being sustained for families.
- 3.8 Effective safeguarding arrangements are supported by clear governance, quality assurance and strong multi-agency working. Practitioners demonstrate confidence managing complex risk, supported by supervision and management oversight.
- 3.9 Strategic and operational relationships are strong and collaborative. Coproduction with children and families at an individual level regarding their care and support is effective, supporting shared ownership and involvement.
- 3.10 Despite these strengths, practice is not always consistent, particularly in recording, reflective analysis, and communication with families. These highlight opportunities for improving practice and systems.
- 3.11 Workforce pressures, access to external services and placement sufficiency continue to present challenges. Strengthening oversight, consistency and partnership responses remain key to maintaining positive momentum and further improving outcomes for children and families.
- 3.12 Overall, findings reflect a strong foundation in children's services for continued delivery and improvement, characterised by effective leadership, a dedicated workforce, child-centred focus and positive partnership working.

## **4 Key Findings and Evidence**

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

### **People**

#### **Strengths**

- 4.1 Strong and visible leadership promotes a skilled and supported workforce underpinned by a clear framework for delivering and developing children's services. Leaders promote an open and compassionate management

approach, supported by a clear workforce development strategy, supervision expectations and structured induction for newly qualified practitioners.

- 4.2 Senior practitioner 'step-up' opportunities enable experienced practitioners to gain structured, on-the-job leadership experience to prepare for progression. This supports professional development and retains skills within children's services. **This is positive practice, reflecting a creative approach to succession planning whilst building workforce confidence and resilience.**
- 4.3 Supervision and training arrangements promote a skilled and supported workforce. All (68/68) staff survey respondents report regular supervision, with nearly all feeling well supported by managers, colleagues, and benefitting from good training. Supervision records and practitioner engagement reinforce this, describing accessible, supportive leadership which prioritises wellbeing.
- 4.4 Operationally, workforce stability and co-location of some teams support continuity and helps practitioners build trusted relationships with families and partners. Practitioner feedback reflects a culture where they feel valued, supported and their professional judgment trusted. This is illustrated by a practitioner who described being "*treated as an expert in your cases*".
- 4.5 A strong strategic commitment to promoting children's voices is underpinned by an outcomes-focused practice framework, quality assurance and themed audits, practice mentors and revised documentation prioritising the child's voice.
- 4.6 Children's views are often captured meaningfully to inform assessments, care planning and risk management. There are strong examples of children's views clearly reflected in safeguarding activity through assessments, conference reports, care and support plans (CASPs), and professional analysis. These link directly to key decisions about safety and progress, showing how children's voices shape professional judgement and outcomes.
- 4.7 Practitioners use relationship-based and direct work tools effectively, such as visual tools, '*day in the life*' narratives, writing directly to children and the *MyST Journey Tool*. These approaches help children understand and reflect on their experiences. **These approaches demonstrate positive practice, supporting genuine, child-centred engagement.**
- 4.8 Families are routinely involved in assessment, planning and review, reflecting strengths and outcomes-focused practice. Many parents feel listened to and involved where communication is consistent. This is reflected across early help and statutory services demonstrating a shared focus on strengths-based practice from the point of early intervention.

- 4.9 Children's voices routinely inform practice, including consideration of communication and language preference, with a Welsh language active offer mainly embedded. This is supported by governance expectations, training and feedback indicating children and family's communication needs are recognised.
- 4.10 Advocacy is promoted, with many children and families informed and able to access support, although recording is not always consistent. This is reinforced by clear advocacy commissioned arrangements and senior oversight. Most people and nearly all staff express advocacy being offered and available, with good practice examples evident of advocacy offered and recorded.

### **Areas for Improvement**

- 4.11 In few instances, records do not clearly show consideration of advocacy, review of an active offer at key points and reasons where advocacy is declined. This reduces assurance people are consistently supported to participate fully in decisions throughout their involvement. **The local authority should ensure greater consistency in evidencing an advocacy offer, review and refusal reasons.**
- 4.12 While leaders clearly emphasise reflective, learning-led practice, this is not consistently shown in social care records and supervision records, which are often task-focused. As a result, recording does not always capture the quality of practice described by people and practitioners. **The local authority should ensure care records and supervision records consistently evidence reflective analysis and professional judgement.**
- 4.13 Practitioners describe strong child-centred practice, including direct work, and feedback mostly indicates CASPs are shared with families, though this is not always reflected in records. Children's voices are not consistently captured at the earliest stages of involvement, including follow-up or a clear explanation where direct engagement has not been possible. Leaders recognise that time and system pressures affect recording consistency. **The local authority should ensure records regularly reflect child-centred practice, children's views, and the clear offering of relevant care documents to families.**
- 4.14 People have mixed experiences of communication with children's services, despite many people feeling able to raise concerns. This includes instances of delay receiving information and variable communication at key transition points and with all people who hold parental responsibility. **The local authority should strengthen timely communication with families, ensuring all with parental responsibility are kept informed and receive information.**
- 4.15 Workforce pressures, linked to increasing demand, complexity and current experience profile of the children's services workforce, can create additional pressure across teams. Practitioners across teams demonstrate a strong

commitment and willingness to support each other in times of pressure. While supervision and support arrangements are strong and senior leaders aware of the pressures, there is clear risk to workforce wellbeing and resilience over time. **The local authority should maintain proactive oversight of workforce capacity, workloads and system pressures which remain central to sustaining workforce wellbeing and resilience.**

## Prevention

### Strengths

- 4.16 A clear service-wide commitment to prevention and early help is underpinned by established strategies and pathways, such as Families First and Flying Start. These provide a continuum of support focused on early intervention, proportionate decision-making and effective escalation and de-escalation. Strong governance, performance oversight and integration with statutory services help target early help where it is most needed, reducing unnecessary escalation and promoting sustainable outcomes for children and families.
- 4.17 Prompt decision-making to new referrals and timely assessments help minimise delay and identify need early. Leaders and managers oversee performance, with practitioners and families describing responsive support at key points of need through early help pathways, including information, advice and assistance and Families First, helping reduce escalation for many. A continued focus on enhancing prevention is also evident, such as Families First plans to strengthen school-based support to identify emerging needs and provide help earlier.
- 4.18 Practitioners identify risk and need early, with effective use of review, planning and supervision supporting safe de-escalation and reunification of children with families where appropriate. Early help, particularly through Families First, supports timely, targeted help which improves family outcomes. Clear pathways and joint forums between early help, statutory and locality teams enable smoother transitions and proportionate responses. **This is positive practice, supporting proportionate decision-making and effective use of early help to manage risk and improve outcomes for children and families.**
- 4.19 Feedback reflects young carers and carers feeling listened to and supported. Wellbeing is supported through early identification, coordinated early help pathways and joint assessment, helping families access timely support and reducing pressure.
- 4.20 Group-based interventions, such as practitioner-initiated pilot groups for children with adverse life experiences (ACEs) in response to identified emotional wellbeing needs, *Circle of Security* programme for parents, and young carer support groups, are providing structured, supportive spaces for people. **These targeted initiatives reflect positive practice, helping children and families build emotional resilience and networks.**
- 4.21 Strengths in family and community networks are recognised as central to preventing escalation and reducing the need for children to enter care. Family-based approaches, like family group conferences, alongside community and early help services are used effectively to build resilience and support families

to stay together safely. Engagement activity and feedback indicate families are encouraged to draw on wider family and community support before concerns escalate. In one example, complex dynamics within a family were stabilised through combined Families First and psychology intervention, demonstrating effective coordinated prevention support.

### **Areas for Improvement**

- 4.22 In some instances, recorded actions, such as in section 47 activity, safety plans and CASPs, lack sufficient clarity to show how risks will be managed, progress reviewed and impact monitored. Actions are not always specific or clearly owned, with variable timescales and review arrangements. In safeguarding processes, this can limit assurance and increase risk of drift. **The local authority should ensure actions are specific, clearly owned, time-bound and reviewed, to enable effective risk management and prevent potential drift.**
- 4.23 The effectiveness of early help and de-escalation is limited by delays or limitations in follow-on support for some families, such as domestic abuse, respite, and specialist mental health services. Feedback from people and staff reflect instances where, despite effective statutory intervention and de-escalation, wider limitations in support undermine family's sustained progress and increase the risk of escalation or repeated involvement. This adds pressure on statutory services. Leaders are focused on mitigating these pressures, such as through internal and commissioned support like MyST and Supporting Change Team interventions. However, it highlights the need to address systemic delays in external provision. **The local authority must continue strengthening multi-agency working, including escalation and accountability, to ensure timely and effective early help and step-down support for families.**

## **Well-being**

### **Strengths**

- 4.24 Safeguarding is supported by clear strategic and governance arrangements, including Corporate Safeguarding Board oversight, Regional Safeguarding Board engagement, and quality assurance processes. This provides leaders with effective oversight of risk and shared learning. At a practice level, evidence reflects effective multi-agency working, strong participation in safeguarding meetings, timely information sharing, and coordinated responses to manage risk.
- 4.25 A framework of audits, performance reporting and senior oversight enables the local authority to understand how well services are performing and where improvement is needed. Learning from audits, complaints, inspections and

performance data is routinely identified and used to drive service improvement. This supports a culture of learning and accountability.

- 4.26 Structured forums, such as multi-agency supervision sessions for discussing complex interventions, and routine outcome strategy meetings, promote shared analysis, professional challenge and coordinated risk management. Partners describe these as effective and valued. **This is positive practice, enabling collective safeguarding oversight, analysis and learning.**
- 4.27 Practitioners demonstrate confidence in managing complex risk, supported by supervision, management oversight and established safeguarding arrangements. Practice reflects timely identification of risk and proportionate responses, including effective use of safety planning and family-based support. Trauma-informed, strengths-based practice is evident, reinforced through leadership commitment and ongoing practice development.
- 4.28 Safeguarding activity is explained clearly to children and parents, helping them understand what is happening and why. Children describe interactions with multi-agency professionals as reassuring and proportionate, enabling many to feel safe and protected. **This reflects positive practice, supporting trust in professionals and confidence in safeguarding processes.**

#### **Areas for Improvement**

- 4.29 While overall risks are managed appropriately and practitioners demonstrate clear understanding of emotional and psychological impact in discussion, this is not always clearly articulated in assessments and plans. This includes some analysis lacking depth regarding the impact of harm on children's lived experience. **The local authority should strengthen consistency and quality of analysis evidence of the impact of harm on children's lived experience, to support robust decision-making, safeguarding oversight and continuity.**
- 4.30 External factors, including delays in police involvement and limited availability of health services, can affect timeliness and effectiveness of safeguarding activity. This risks uncertainty for families and can mean practitioners managing risks for longer. While escalation routes are understood and used by partners, delays can still affect progress and increase the risk of drift for families. **The local authority should actively monitor these delays and escalate concerns with partners where capacity impacts timeliness, to ensure safeguarding responses remain consistent for children.**

## Partnership

### Strengths

- 4.31 There is a strong strategic commitment to partnership working, supported by effective local and regional relationships and clear governance. The local authority engages actively with corporate and regional safeguarding arrangements, promoting openness, shared accountability and constructive challenge. Partners consistently describe the local authority as collaborative, transparent, with willingness to engage.
- 4.32 Effective multi-agency working is evident across safeguarding, prevention and care. Partners work together consistently in statutory safeguarding meetings and conferences, with coordinated responses and timely information sharing evident. Stakeholder feedback reflects high confidence in partnership working.
- 4.33 Effective co-production is evident at an individual level, with children and families actively involved in planning and review. Practitioners view co-production as central to strengths-based practice, with many families reporting feeling listened to and respected. Where appropriate, young people are supported to take an active role in their reviews, including chairing meetings, supporting their control and involvement. **This reflects positive, empowering practice promoting shared ownership and meaningful influence in planning and decision-making.**

### Areas for Improvement

- 4.34 Whilst co-production with families is effective at an individual level, some people do not understand how their feedback influences wider service improvement. Whilst many people feel listened to, it is not always clear how learning is used to shape services. **The local authority should improve how learning from lived experience, advocacy and complaints informs service development and commissioning, and how this is shared with people.**
- 4.35 Ongoing placement sufficiency pressures can affect choice and continuity for some children. Leaders recognise these challenges and demonstrate a clear strategic focus on strengthening local provision, with proactive and creative responses evident. **The local authority must ensure placement sufficiency and market sustainability arrangements consistently align with children's needs to deliver stable, suitable and, where possible, local placements.**
- 4.36 Variability in how thresholds are applied across partners can add pressure on front-door and safeguarding services. This can result in statutory intervention being used where earlier support may be more appropriate. The local authority is actively responding through partner engagement, outcomes-focused

discussions, and multi-agency learning. **The local authority should maintain these efforts to strengthen consistent, shared understanding of thresholds across partners to support proportionate decision-making, reduce unnecessary escalation and strengthen early help and prevention.**

## 5. Next Steps

CIW expects the local authority to consider the areas identified for improvement and take appropriate action to address them. CIW will monitor progress through its ongoing performance review activity with the local authority. Where relevant, CIW expects 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 25 people through review and tracking of their social care record. We reviewed 22 social care records and tracked three.
- Tracking a person's social care record includes having conversations with the person receiving social care services, their family or carers, key worker, the key worker's manager, and where appropriate other professionals involved.
- We engaged, through interviews, focus and/or support groups, with 15 children and young people receiving services. We also engaged with seven parents/representatives.
- We engaged, through interviews, focus and/or support groups, with 43 local authority employees and an elected member (this included social workers, team managers, service managers, head of service). We also engaged with four external partners.
- We analysed survey responses from 47 people, 68 social services staff, and 20 stakeholders.
- We reviewed supporting documentation provided by the local authority for the purpose of the inspection.

CIW's 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. An active offer was accepted by people who wished to engage with us in the medium of Welsh during the assurance check.

## 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 read 'Lou Bushell-Bauers', with a stylized, cursive style.

**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 well-being. 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 well-being and the things that matter most to them.
<b>Well-being</b>	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.
<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 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

<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%