

Wrexham County Borough Council

Report of Children's Services Risk
Based Inspection
and
Adults Services Performance
Evaluation Inspection

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.
This document is also available in Welsh.

Introduction

In February 2020, Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) met formally with the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), senior officers and senior members of Wrexham County Borough Council (WCBC). The purpose of the meeting was to discuss significant failings in Wrexham children's services and seek clarification from the local authority on their immediate plans for improvement.

We stressed the need for urgent change in the culture of children's services to ensure everyone is held responsible for their actions and children remain at the centre of social care practice.

The purpose of this risk based inspection activity and previous monitoring work was to review how well WCBC children's social services has progressed on its journey of improvement. We looked for evidence of learning to demonstrate service improvements can be sustainable into the future.

A team of inspectors spent seven working days inspecting children's social services and three days inspecting adult social services between the 12 and 23 of October 2020. We also monitored children's services throughout the previous year, meeting with senior managers and reviewing performance data.

Throughout our inspection and monitoring activity, we received very high levels of engagement and cooperation from all concerned which we considered to reflect the local authority's stated desire to do better for the people of Wrexham. We acknowledge the added difficulties the local authority faces in managing services through a pandemic and thank everyone who participated in this work and made it possible.

This report summarises evidence and analysis from case file reviews, reading, interviews, discussions and information gathering undertaken during that time. The range of people we interviewed included social services leaders, managers and practitioners and their partners from local health services and the third sector. We spoke with and listened to some of the young people, families, adults and carers who are in receipt of support or care from the local authority.

The report style is part of our new assurance pilot. It is deliberately succinct and direct in recognition of the many competing pressures on everyone involved in social care and the volume of information we all try to consume on a daily basis. Our clarity of message should help drive improvement.

Next steps:

CIW will continue to monitor and return to re-inspect social services in Wrexham County Borough Council within 12 months.

We thank everyone who worked with us to produce this report and help support improvement in Wrexham County Borough Council social services.

Children's Social Services: Risk Based Inspection

Summary:

The breadth of work undertaken by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) to improve children's social services in Wrexham in a relatively short period is commendable. After many years of fluctuating quality in children's services in Wrexham, the CEO's decisive action and constructive challenge has created the environment necessary to achieve significant positive change.

Elected members have shown their corporate support for children's services through increased funding for social care and raised social work salaries commensurate with the wider social care market. These actions have begun to attract experienced professionals into Wrexham.

Working in partnership with people across the service, elected members and external partners, the CEO has established an effective accelerated improvement board. With the support from an experienced interim director of social services from a neighbouring authority, the board has produced an accurate assessment of the local authority's services and a clear plan for improvement.

The plan reflects the time and ongoing effort needed to deliver sustainable change in services. An opportunity to break from a history of temporary improvement and further decline which placed children at risk, demoralised staff and contributed to a situation where vacant posts became so undesirable many could not be filled.

The newly recruited management team come to Wrexham with a high level of experience and skills and understand the expectations placed on them to drive necessary improvements across children's services. They must be given the time and support from leaders to allow them to succeed.

In the 32 children's case files we reviewed during this inspection, we did not find any children to be at immediate risk of harm. This is a significant improvement on findings in our monitoring activity undertaken over the past year. However, there remains many operational areas which have not improved and we continued to find wide variations in the standards of social work practice including; gaps in social work recording, analysis and decision-making.

The quality of plans for children in need of care and support and protection remained too variable and often lacked clarity. Managers must ensure social workers see children within statutory timescales, children's views must be recorded and the outcomes children want to achieve must be captured.

Work with families was not sufficiently robust to support positive change. To provide the best opportunity for children to remain safe within their family parents must be seen as equal partners and realistic goals for improvement must be agreed and understood.

Despite rapid and meaningful progress in very difficult circumstances we consider children's social services to remain inadequate but with significantly improved prospects for improvement.

Our main findings are recorded in line with the four principles of the 2014 Act.

People - voice and choice

Strengths:

1. Strong and confident leadership from leaders and senior managers who demonstrate an accurate understanding of their services and areas requiring improvement.
2. The local authority recognises and is committed to commissioning and promoting independent advocacy for children in Wrexham.
3. Caseloads of practitioners have reduced and they report feeling safe and supported by a management team with the value base, skills and experience to drive improvements in practice.
4. Additional capacity made available by the leadership team to progress and conclude outstanding pieces of work and ensure children and families are not subject to interventions from statutory agencies for any longer than is necessary.

What needs to improve:

1. The local authority must ensure record keeping is effective and each child remains the focus of practice and is clearly visible in their own casefile.
2. Managers and practitioners must ensure the voices and views of children and their families are central to their assessments, and inform care and support planning.
3. Managers and practitioners must ensure decisions are timely and evidence based. Case files must contain the rationale for decisions made.
4. The local authority should ensure practitioners understand and are supported to meet the statutory duty to offer assessments to carers and where appropriate provide support to promote carers well-being.
5. Managers must ensure high quality supervision and management support across all service areas. Supervision should provide opportunity for personal and professional reflection, constructive challenge and direction setting.
6. The local authority must give higher priority to its escalation process for Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs). Shortfalls identified by IROs should be resolved efficiently and effectively for the benefit of the child.
7. The local authority must ensure care experienced young people are consistently provided with sufficient support. Some care experienced young adults felt support and contact was inconsistent and insufficient.

Well-being

Strengths:

1. Partners and professionals make timely and appropriate referrals to social services and receive feedback to the concerns they raise.
2. Vigilance, timeliness and management oversight is evident for the benefit of children and young people as they first come to the attention of social services.
3. Child protection referrals trigger safeguarding mechanisms appropriately and support relevant information sharing between police and children's services.
4. Practitioners identify practical benefits of agile working and using technology to improve their own work life balance.

What needs to improve:

1. The rigour and impact of management oversight must be sufficient to avoid drift, ensure children's plans are progressed and children protected from foreseeable harm.
2. Managers must ensure accumulating concerns of child neglect are always recognised and result in effective interventions to prevent harm from long term neglect.
3. The local authority must ensure its response to children at risk of exploitation improves so their vulnerabilities are fully recognised and engagement leads to positive outcomes for the young person.
4. The local authority should improve understanding around identification and management of children's own risky behaviours.
5. Managers and practitioners must ensure they have sufficient understanding of the children they are working with including their background and current situation to ensure continuity of planning including contingency planning.
6. Waiting times for occupational therapy support does not meet with the intentions of the 2014 Act and must improve to prevent children and families reaching crisis.

Prevention

Strengths:

1. Early intervention in line with the requirements of the 2014 Act has become an important strategic driver for the local authority. Expanding choice and availability of short breaks for disabled children is an area the local authority is looking to progress.
2. The Information advice and assistance (IAA) service is operational and signposts to early intervention and prevention. Managers are currently

reviewing the resources available to the IAA service with a view to re-engaging partners who have drifted away from the service.

3. The impact of mental health issues in families on the well-being of children is recognised. The introduction of a mental health specialist into children's single point of access is a step towards improving outcomes for children.
4. As part of the children looked after reduction strategy, the Edge of Care panel has been refreshed into a multi-agency Solutions panel with a focus on maintaining children safely at home. Practitioners describe decisions made at the panel to be "very much about what the child needs" and a "significant step forward".

What needs to improve:

1. Chronologies and case summaries must improve to ensure children benefit from engagement with practitioners who understand their story. Including capturing interventions tried and what has worked well.
2. Children's assessments must adequately address all five components of the assessment process. The family's strengths must be recognised and their barriers to achieving positive outcomes explored and addressed.
3. Practitioners must maintain their focus on outcomes for the child. Assessments and legal planning meetings must become timely and not delay decisions or court action.
4. Care and support/protection plans/reviews must focus on the outcomes for the child, be realistic for families, and enable all involved to understand and measure progress.
5. Social workers must undertake visits to children within statutory timescales. Managers should address any lapses in statutory duties in real time.

Partnerships

Strengths:

1. The accelerated improvement board is working effectively to drive improvements across children's services. Practitioners describe the new approach as a journey of improvement with a senior management team who are more children focused.
2. Strong corporate commitment to improving services for children in Wrexham has delivered increased funding for social services. Team managers describe enjoying engagement with corporate parenting panel to address strategic challenges.
3. A no detriment Special Guardianship funding arrangement has been approved by elected members as part of Wrexham's children looked after reduction strategy.

4. Positive working relationships with the regional safeguarding board and neighbouring Welsh local authorities is ensuring Wrexham children's services have a professional support structure from which they draw experience, knowledge and support.
5. Changing patterns of work in response to the pandemic has been a huge challenge and learning opportunity. Opportunities to experience different ways of working has freed up travel time and built trust between managers and practitioners.

What needs to improve:

1. Social workers must work in partnership with parents as equals. They must ensure parents are informed of opportunities to have someone of their choice to support them to participate fully in assessment and reviews
2. Social workers must work in partnership with families to agree achievable, realistic goals for improvement. Necessary improvements must be clearly recorded and communicated with families.
3. The authority must ensure a sufficient, qualified and competent workforce to meet its statutory duties. Senior Managers are continuing with innovative ways of overcoming this deficit. Never the less, the ability of the local authority to meet its statutory duties remains compromised until professionals with permanent contracts fill posts.
4. The local authority must ensure agile working is underpinned by reliable, technology, routinely able to support confidential communication with statutory partners and families.

Adult Social Services: Performance Evaluation Inspection

Summary:

This performance evaluation of adults social services was undertaken as part of a planned pilot programme of work across all 22 local authorities in Wales between October 2020 and spring 2021.

Services for adults in Wrexham have not experienced the same level of turnover of managers and practitioners as Wrexham children's services. The quality of adults services have not been subject of the same level of concerns as children's services and have therefore not been subject to the same level of scrutiny as Wrexham children's services.

We have found some notable improvements from our previous inspection of adult services undertaken in 2018. Improvements noted include improved management line of sight on frontline practice, growing confidence in commissioning and reduction in some waiting lists for services.

Some issues continue to require improvement, including insufficient engagement with health colleagues in delivering single point of access for adults and community mental health services. Integrated working and seamless service delivery of health and social care services needs to be strengthened in Wrexham and driven by an agreed and owned strategic vision.

We do not underestimate the challenge of driving improvement across many areas of work at the same time. Particularly when many practitioners across health and social care are impacted in some way by Covid-19. However, given time, the current pace of change within the local authority provides some assurance outstanding issues in adults services will improve as time allows.

Adult safeguarding in Wrexham is effective and solution focused practise is firmly embedded. There is evidence of the safeguarding process used to underpin ongoing conversations with adults who may be at risk of abuse or neglect. This shift in emphasis away from completion of safeguarding process as an outcome in itself and move to using the process to engage with individuals as people who may need support is very positive.

Social work practice including capturing and recording the voice of adults is generally good. Understanding of the importance of the Mental Capacity Act 2005 in adults services and beginning conversations with the assumption adults know what is best for themselves, provides a solid foundation for social work with adults in Wrexham. A 'can do' person centred approach in the service ensures many people have their voices heard and receive the support they need.

However, a small number of service areas for adults do require improvement to ensure peoples voices are heard and unnecessary waiting lists do not develop in transfers between teams. The local authority must not wait until people are in crisis before they respond and must not make decisions on eligibility for services based upon diagnosis or labelling.

We provide our key points below within the four principles of the 2014 Act.

People voice and choice

Strengths:

1. In most assessment teams there is good understanding and recording of the outcomes adults want to achieve.
2. The importance of mental capacity in making informed decisions is embedded in practice.
3. Assessments of mental capacity are generally good and used at appropriate times.

What needs to improve:

1. Understanding of the importance of beginning engagement with adults by assuming they know what is best for themselves must be embedded across all service areas.
2. The local authority should reflect more robustly on their practice when an individual is refused access to support on more than one occasion. It is important cases are objectively reviewed when requests for support are declined on more than one occasion.
3. Advocacy support is available, however, the local authority must ensure agreement is reached and recorded on whether advocacy is needed at the earliest opportunity.
4. Carers' voices are not heard consistently. There is some good practice in this area but practitioners were sometimes not clear whether carers assessments had been undertaken by the third sector or what the outcome was. The local authority must meet its statutory duty to offer assessments to carers and where applicable meet their needs.

Well-being

Strengths:

1. Clear recognition of the importance of people maintaining control in their own lives.
2. Good use of safeguarding process to engage people in meaningful conversations about their safety and well-being.
3. Each team has completed an audit of support offered to team members to ensure practitioners working through Covid-19 have the support they need.

What needs to improve:

1. Service response to identified need must be focused on need, not dictated by age or diagnosis. Application of thresholds to exclude people who do not meet service criteria but who could benefit from support should be challenged by managers.
2. Rationale for decisions about reports of adults at risk must always be recorded including decisions to take no further action.

Prevention

Strengths:

1. The importance of timely hospital discharge is understood and remains a priority. Including offering wrap around services to support people to return to their own homes.
2. There is recognition of the role of families and other statutory and third sector partners in supporting people in the community. Recognising strengths in the community is enabling practitioners to offer early focused intervention and be solution focused.

What needs to improve:

1. Timeliness and consistency of service responses must improve. Senior managers must use their improved line of sight on front line practice to support team managers in understanding and improving workflow. Senior managers would benefit from real time management information.
2. Timeliness of occupational therapy support must improve. A sustainable model of delivery is essential to promote independence and prevent people reaching crisis.
3. Staffing levels must improve and become more stable. High levels of vacant posts and posts filled with agency workers puts extra pressure on permanent team members who are required step up and fill any gaps in provision. The local authority is at risk of failing to meet its statutory duties if key staff members leave the service or at times of long-term sickness absence.
4. The local authority must improve timeliness of reviews of care and support plans for people in receipt of domiciliary care. Some people may not be getting the support they need and others may be in receipt of inappropriate care.

Partnerships

Strengths:

1. Community agents have been extended to benefit the whole local authority. There is further scope to develop this project in line with the 2014 Act.

2. People told us they benefitted from the support of voluntary and statutory organisations during covid-19. They spoke positively about the benefits to their well-being. Examples of support provided included regular telephone calls, support with shopping, collecting medication and virtual drop-in groups.
3. Safeguarding team have a good working relationship with Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board colleagues and work proportionately to address safeguards concerns on hospital wards as necessary.
4. Positive learning from joint working in the south of the county to avoid hospital admissions and support complex cases is providing a positive model to consider for roll out across the local authority area.

What needs to improve:

1. Closer working is required between children and adults safeguarding teams. Practitioners in adults services should be able to request access to children's case files as needed to address safeguarding concerns.
2. Strategic relationships with the third sector are of inconsistent quality and must improve. Further engagement and joint planning with the third sector could improve early intervention and preventative services across Wrexham; increase sustainability of services and increase choice for people who need support.
3. Strategic partnerships between health and social care services that can maximise best use of resources and deliver improved outcomes for people must develop and mature rapidly. Leaders must work together effectively to find solutions and deliver seamless and sustainable services for people in Wrexham.