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Dear Director,

Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) – Assurance Check 2021: Denbighshire County Council

This letter summarises the findings of our assurance check undertaken 28 June to 2 July 2021. The purpose of this assurance check was to review how well local authority social services continue to help and support adults and children with a focus on safety and well-being.

Overview

In March 2020, CIW suspended its routine programme of work in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to enable local authorities and providers to focus fully on responding to the challenging circumstances. A revised programme with local authorities recommenced in September to provide assurance about how well people are safeguarded and their well-being promoted during the pandemic. We considered safety and well-being of people who use or may need to use services, the safety of services they access and the safety and well-being of people who work in services. We always remain mindful of the four principles of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014: People - Voice and Control, Well-being, Prevention, Partnerships and Integration, and frame our letters and reports within those headings.

Our focus was on:

1. How well is the local authority discharging its statutory functions to keep people who need care and support and carers who need support, safe and promote their well-being during the pandemic?

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We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

Summary of findings and priorities for improvement:

People - voice and control - We asked: How well is the local authority ensuring people, carers and practitioners are having their voices heard, making informed choices, and maintaining control over their lives?

Most people who contact Denbighshire social services have their voices heard and maintain control over the care and support they receive. Practitioners regularly use informal advocacy to help develop an understanding of the needs of adults and children and the well-being outcomes they each want to achieve. While we found some good examples of practitioners engaging well with children, we found some examples where the voices of children need to be strengthened.

The voices of carers were also seen in some case files and we saw a good example of support provided to the carer alongside support for the cared for person. There is room for improvement to ensure practitioners always record all identified needs in care and support plans; including those needs deemed eligible if the carer/family members were not meeting them.

Concerns remain about how to best to maintain supportive relationships with adults and children when it is not always possible to meet face-to-face. In these instances, garden visits and other creative opportunities are tried to maintain support; including providing access to information technology and providing support to increase skills.

We heard that despite some initial reluctance from adults and children to engage via technology, challenges over lack of equipment, and some people choosing to dial into meetings, communication channels have largely remained open and in some instances have improved.

Despite many competing pressures it is evident practitioners continue to focus assessments upon what matters to people and rightly place emphasis on encouraging and supporting people to consider how they can use their own strengths and resources to improve their own well-being.

The contents of assessments reflect an ongoing conversation between the individual, carer, and practitioner and sometimes their wider family. We found this to be the result of a positive culture where practitioners are encouraged to work with people who need support as equals and co-produce solutions tailored to individual circumstances.

We heard how practitioners have made adaptations to their practice and ways of working to maintain engagement with children and adults through what has been an incredibly difficult time for almost everyone. Including, working hard to create a range of opportunities through social media and apps to ensure people can maintain contact with their social workers and continue to capture what matters to them.

The local introduction of a new 'integrated care and support plan' assessment tool in adult services is a positive step in supporting practitioners ensure their response to individuals is proportionate and person centred. However, managers must ensure practitioners are able to capture the outcome of the assessment and any advice or guidance they have given on the assessment and eligibility tool. As services move further towards integration of service delivery, it is also essential managers work with wider partners to ensure positive improvements and amendments in assessment tools are consistent across the footprint of the local health board.

Well-being - We asked: To what extent is the local authority promoting well-being, ensuring people maintain their safety and achieve positive outcomes that matter to them?

The use of assistive technology has continued and been increasingly explored during pandemic as a means to reduce isolation for some people and provide help to overcome physical and sensory barriers for people with complex disabilities or chronic conditions. There is a new understanding of how people with learning disabilities, physical and sensory impairments and older people can benefit and enjoy using technology in a way not previously considered possible and with positive outcomes not previously appreciated. The local authority will want to continue to explore this area of work.

Practitioners understand the importance of the Mental Capacity Act 2005 to the well-being of the most vulnerable people in our society. Practitioners for adults appropriately considers people's mental capacity to engage in safeguarding enquiries, their assessments and care and support planning. Practitioners do respect the right of individuals to make what others may consider unwise decisions and record those decisions appropriately.

We recognise the continuing positive culture of improvement this represents in adult safeguarding in Denbighshire. We acknowledge the challenges overcome by the team in maintaining the safeguarding function during the move to virtual working for the benefit of protecting people who may be the most vulnerable in our communities and at risk of neglect abuse or harm.

Maintaining the well-being of people who work in services is essential to their ability to continue to care and support others. It was clear in discussions with managers and practitioners that at this point in the COVID-19 pandemic, despite ongoing positive support from managers, many people who work in social services are tired. Some told us they are exhausted and feel drained by what has been a very distressing time for them at home and at work. The fact that so many practitioners and managers have continued in their roles and taken on new duties to help protect others is a credit to them and the local authority.

We recognise and encourage positive efforts to provide practitioners with consistent opportunities for reflective practice, shared learning and peer support. The peer support meetings in community resource teams are a very positive example of how by working together as a team, shared learning can lead to the right response at the right time and a more efficient means of improving outcomes for people.

Despite the challenges, practitioners in the local authority told us they feel supported by the significant efforts made to promote their well-being. Communication within and between teams is good and individuals reiterated how services overall continue to benefit from positive leadership. An early move to using information technology was a positive initiative that enabled people to settle quickly into new ways of maintaining positive working relationships within and between teams.

It is clear managers and practitioners already recognise the benefits of virtual working to more effective and efficient use of their time and are balancing the benefits with an empathetic understanding of how adapting to virtual working has been easier for some than others. We heard how working from home has left some people feeling isolated and how some have adapted very quickly and been able to motivate themselves far better than even they anticipated.

Specifically, increased use of virtual working has freed up travel time. Practitioners and managers describe how freeing up travel time has improved accessibility of colleagues, managers and external partners. The majority of people we spoke with told us they appreciate the benefits of less time spent driving.

Increased attendance of external partners at key meetings including safeguarding meetings for adults and children and community resource team meetings is as one of the key benefits of virtual working. This supports the local authority wider responsibility for sustainable development and is worthy of consideration for retention as services move towards a new normal.

Prevention - We asked: To what extent is the local authority successful in promoting prevention and reducing need for increased or formal support from statutory agencies?

Key challenges arising from the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 are the importance of timely preventative services and the importance of making support available to promote the upbringing of children within their families in their own communities.

Leaders and managers recognise the importance of keeping children within their families where possible, and have developed a culture where promoting support and early intervention is recognised as presenting the best opportunity for children to remain within their families.

There is strong focus on exploring opportunities to provide kinship care for children and a significant number of children are placed with parents and receiving high levels of support from a range of agencies; including health visitors, school nurses, and family support services to ensure good outcomes for children.

We saw evidence of some very positive work supporting looked after children and their foster parents demonstrating a good understanding of the benefits of therapeutic work for with children and families. We saw examples of children's emotional well-being improving

with such intervention, including 72 hour assessments and the concerted efforts made by practitioners to enable families to build their skills and raise their children within their own families.

However, social work professional curiosity, recording and decision making is not consistently good across all areas of children's services. We saw a number of credible referrals submitted and resubmitted for the same children before referrals were accepted and appropriate action taken.

We found managers in children's services are aware of this inconsistency and have already begun to take steps to drive improvement. With the added information provided during this assurance check, we found senior managers acting decisively to ensure children are safeguarded and strengthen their plan to deliver sustainable improvements in social work practice in this area of the service.

The action plan must quickly deliver improved focus on individual children, more robust analysis, and recording of risk and of key decisions. Management oversight must be strengthened and quality audits temporarily halted during COVID-19 should be reinstated.

We raised inconsistencies of practice with the director of social services who provided immediate assurance of a rapid response to any deficits identified. We recognise there is very good work happening in the local authority and the skills and knowledge necessary to address concerns already exist within the service. Immediate improvements must ensure children are protected, and to do this practitioners must develop or refresh their skills quickly. Attempts must be made to ensure this is a positive learning experience and sustainable improvements in practice are the result.

The challenges of recruiting suitably qualified practitioners to both adults and children's services adds to the importance of developing the skills and knowledge of people who already work within the service. Current job vacancies in adults and children's services are adding to work load pressure on individuals in teams and delaying some service improvements.

In response, managers describe an increased recognition of need for the local authority to 'grow their own' professional workforce and the start of their plan for doing so. The plan stems from a recognition of the skills and experience of support workers who have the knowledge and skills to step up into professional roles but without the financial security to be able to leave employment and attend university.

Senior management arrangements for children's services remain in a period of transition following natural progression of previous post holders. Leaders will need to ensure respective vacancies and interim management arrangements are prioritised for resolution.

Partnership and Integration - We asked: To what extent is the local authority able to assure itself opportunities for partnership working are positively exploited to maximise person centred planning and ensure integrated service delivery and service sustainability?

There is evidence of positive partnership working between practitioners in different agencies and between practitioners and families. We saw evidence of practitioners developing professional working relationships with people, built upon co-operation and shared understanding of what matters. The links developed between education and children's social services provides positive examples of how partnership working can support children and families to stay connected and access services when they need them.

Providers of care and support told us how they work well with social services and find them to be open and honest willing to be flexible and help to resolve challenges as they arise. Some providers consider the relationship with social services has improved over the last year as the number of necessary meetings have increased and communication flowed freely to the benefit of people who need support and those who provide care and support.

The flourishing of positive working with statutory partners during COVID-19 is in part due to the good foundations laid during early planning and development for Community Resource Teams. It appears a shared external crisis has added impetus and driven change far more quickly than previously possible.

Increased engagement of a range of colleagues in virtual Community Resource Team meetings is one very good example we saw working in practice. Leaders will now seek to capitalise on recent achievements to review strategic plans and seek new opportunities to deliver rights services at the right time.

External pressures upon the service including diminished resources and complex demand are creating significant challenges. Some issues are reaching crisis point and the creativity of the management team is regularly tested.

In some geographical areas of Denbighshire, the inability to recruit domiciliary care staff results in demand outstripping supply and some people having to wait too long for services they are eligible to receive. At times, this places further pressure on family carers and can result in relationship or family breakdown and escalation of need. Lack of availability of domiciliary care services generally means the local authority is unable to promote voice and choice for people who need care and support and want to remain in their own homes.

Accommodation options for individuals continues to be a challenge in Denbighshire. We reviewed two case files for young people whose home address is bed and breakfast accommodation. The local authority and wider partners must consider how a more suitable response to young people who are at risk of homelessness neglect and abuse is provided in Denbighshire.

Opportunities to build community capacity have emerged as council officers from across the local authority have helped to provide a response to vulnerable people who need support. We heard how some people found new rewards from engaging directly with people who need support and wanted to consider how they may continue to do so. A solid achievement on which local authority officers want to build opportunities for volunteering.

Driven by external challenges and their own commitment to succeed, social services senior managers in Denbighshire continue to lead with confidence and develop increasingly creative solutions at pace. Adult's services benefit from having an experienced and stable management team. They have a good understanding of their statutory duties and demonstrate ongoing commitment to ensure services deliver positive outcomes for people.

We heard how all managers work well with a range of statutory and third sector partners maintaining open and honest dialogue with clear benefits for people. In the face of the challenges, leaders and senior managers must not lose sight of the importance of meeting their statutory duties.

Method:

- we reviewed documentation supplied in advance of our visit
- we spoke with people, some people who are supported by services, their families and their carers.
- we reviewed 33 case files
- we held case tracking discussions on 11 case files
- we spoke with over five professional staff
- we held seven focus group discussions

Next Steps

We have identified strengths and areas for priority improvement and we will review the progress of these areas through our performance evaluation review meetings with the heads of service and director. We expect the areas of improvement we have identified to be included in the local authority's improvement plans. We would like to extend our thanks to all those who helped with the arrangements for this assurance check and to those people and staff who spoke with us.

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Yours sincerely,



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Head of Local Authority Inspection

Care Inspectorate Wales