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County Hall  
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CH7 6NB

Date: 04 November 2021

Dear Director,

### **Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) – Assurance Check 2021: Flintshire County Council**

This letter summarises the findings of our assurance check on 19 to 23 April 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.

We focused our key lines of enquiry within the four principles of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and have recorded our judgements and findings aligned to these - People - Voice and Control, Prevention, Well-Being, Partnerships and Integration.

#### **Overview**

In March 2020, CIW suspended its routine programme 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 people are being safeguarded and 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 focused our key lines of enquiry within the four principles of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and have recorded our judgements and findings aligned to these: People - Voice and Control, Prevention, Partnerships and Integration, Well-being.

## **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?
2. What is the local authority doing to prevent the need for children to come into care; and are children returning home to their families quickly enough where safe to do so?

## **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. While also balancing the recommendations and requirements made by Public Health Wales and Welsh Government to limit the spread of COVID-19?

People are involved in the planning and delivery of their care and support services. They are supported to identify what matters to them and how they might achieve their personal well-being outcomes. In most of the cases we reviewed, outcomes are clearly described and the actions to achieve them are identified.

There was evidence of people being supported by informal advocates to participate in assessments and decisions that affect them and of children and families being supported by buddies to ensure their views are represented at child protection case conferences. The local authority gives regard to the rights of children to be offered formal advocacy. Whilst we heard and saw some examples of this offer being made, it was not always accepted. In speaking with practitioners it was positive that they see themselves as advocates for the children they work with, but it was less clear that there is a shared understanding of the added value and function of independent advocacy. This is an area where practitioners need to refresh to ensure consistent consideration is given to both informal and formal advocacy as outlined in Part 10 Code of Practice for the 2014 Act.

There was a recognition of the additional pressures experienced by carers during the pandemic. We found evidence of carers' needs including young carers being appropriately considered and supported alongside the cared for person.

People, including carers, were given the opportunity to tailor and manage their own support through use of direct payments. Evidence was seen of direct payments working well for individuals and carers and used creatively during the pandemic as a means of providing alternative respite.

The challenges of recruitment and retention of personal assistants is being addressed by the Flintshire Direct Payment Team who have re-designed the direct payment web page and created the Personal Assistant Portal. The web page provides the information and advice people need to enable them to make an informed choice whilst the portal aims to

help people search for personal assistants as well as assisting personal assistants to find suitable employment. Alongside a learning provider, the team are designing specific training for personal assistants which includes an Induction Certificate which will be accessible to all employers wanting to provide training & development opportunities to their personal assistants.

People we spoke with told us the local authority had maintained safe contact with them throughout the pandemic. Where needed, direct safe face-to-face contact has continued, subject to a COVID risk assessment and Public Health Guidance. We saw examples of practitioners and providers working creatively as means of delivering their professional responsibilities, ensuring peoples voices were heard.

Most practitioners who responded to our survey felt supported by colleagues and managers and regarded their workload as manageable. We found the workforce to be knowledgeable, dedicated, and practitioners focused on positive outcomes for people. Whilst a small number of practitioners identified that vacancies and sickness created pressure for some teams, overall we found morale was good and practitioners were positive about their experience of working for the local authority. Staff described feeling valued and said managers were supportive and accessible, whilst senior managers were described as being visible and responsive.

Training opportunities have continued with a number of digital platforms used to enable the workforce to access online training. Flintshire County Council continue to support the professional development of practitioners and managers. Newly qualified staff told us they are supported in their first year of practice by regular supervision, mentoring arrangements, and a protected caseload. Whilst a senior practitioner told us of the support the local authority commissioned to develop her leadership skills.

**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? Including taking all necessary steps to support the upbringing of the child by the child's family and supporting people with mental health issues before they reach crisis.

Flintshire County Council have worked hard to ensure that prevention is an inherent part of the local authority's business and the importance of community support has been recognised during the pandemic.

We found a positive integrated approach resulting in a culture of prevention through joint working, supportive infrastructures, and aligned delivery systems. This was evident in a prudent approach to resource allocation ensuring the right help was available at the right time which prevents escalation of need and improves the quality of the individual's journey through the health and social care system.

In adults services we saw a focus on preventative and targeted support with the availability of step up/down and community resources to support people. This included specialist dementia workers, timely access to equipment, minor adaptations, and assistive technology. We heard how the solution focused approach in mental health prevented people from going on to need more intensive services.

In children's services the emphasis in the Early Help Hub is on helping parents to develop their own abilities, their coping mechanisms and strengths to identify and manage problems. Practitioners valued the range of resources available to support placement stability and improve emotional well-being and a better understanding of children's behavioural issues. We heard how closer working with other agencies during the pandemic had helped the authority to develop a better-shared awareness of the range of community preventive services available to children and families. The inclusion of representation of the children and young people's mental health service (CAMHS) in the Early Help Hub during the pandemic was identified as a significant strength by practitioners. However, there is still a need to ensure the evidence/analysis which informs decision making in the Early Help Hub is consistently recorded to ensure people are getting the right support and assistance at the right time.

Senior managers have a good understanding and knowledge of the profile of children looked after. The well-being of the child is seen as the priority in all planning decisions, and there is a strong commitment to the preventative agenda and to the safe reduction of the children looked after population. The local authority has invested in Multi-Systemic Therapy and we heard how the team has worked to enable children at risk of coming in to care to remain with families without recourse to statutory services.

**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?

Partnerships were found to be working well at all levels and are delivering an integrated sustainable approach to meeting need and promoting well-being in line with legislation and expectations. In the cases we reviewed we saw evidence of practitioners developing a professional working relationship with people built upon co-operation to promote independence and developing a shared understanding of what matters.

Senior leaders and partners who responded to our survey told us the strategic partnership between the Flintshire County Council and Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board (BCUHB) has developed and strengthened during the pandemic. Partners worked together in the early stages of the pandemic to prepare the Ysbyty Enfys in Deeside, as well as expanding care home provision to alleviate pressure on hospitals and to ensure positive well-being outcomes for the people of Flintshire.

Managers and practitioners described well-established operational relationships with partners and a clear commitment to collaborative working across the authority. The increased use of digital platforms has meant agencies are contributing more effectively in statutory meetings including safeguarding strategy discussions and reviews.

Practitioners told us some key partners were not undertaking face-to-face visits until recently and how this had hindered the completion of assessment and care planning during the pandemic. Providers spoke positively of the support they had received from the local authority during the pandemic. They valued the level of communication and the quality of the advice and support received.

The strategic approach implemented by the local authority during the pandemic facilitated targeted collaborative working across portfolios and services. In children's services for example, we saw effective working relationship between children's services and education in identifying and making appropriate provision for the most vulnerable children during the pandemic. In addition, we saw partners working creatively with children's services to support families. Parents told us how much they valued the package of care and activities developed with Play Officers, Theatre Clwyd and Aura Sports to give children and young people the opportunity to try something different during school holidays. In adults services we heard how departments within the local authority worked together to identify a building to become the North East Wales Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) Hub. Within three days of acquiring the building, the service was fully operational and enabled the North East Wales Community Equipment Service (NEWCES) to promptly set-up an efficient delivery system.

**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?

Flintshire County Council benefits from an experienced senior management team. There is strong commitment and political support for both adults and children's services and a thorough and well-developed understanding of their strengths and current challenges.

The local authority has exercised its functions under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and ensures it makes a positive contribution to the well-being of people who need care and support.

The timeliness and quality of statutory reviews seen were good in both adults and children's services. In children's services we saw good practice with minutes being written directly to the child, acknowledging the child's wishes, and explaining in child-friendly language the outcomes and decisions of their review. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) told us they contact children prior to the review and it was positive that they undertook midpoint checks on progress. We found issues were escalated as needed and relationships between professionals supported through a constructive early resolution approach.

We found variable practice in relation to how well the local authority responded to children safeguarding matters. The best examples involved timely responses with prompt information gathering to help address child protection concerns. Whilst in some of the case files reviewed, responses were delayed including the development of multi-agency safety plans. The local authority should review how it conducts safeguarding enquiries to ensure the individual needs of each child is identified and addressed and is resulting in safety plans. The local authority should assure itself children are seen and seen alone as appropriate during the enquiry period, and core groups for children named on the child protection register are consistently conducted in line with statutory requirements.

In the cases we reviewed adult safeguarding reports were screened and enquiries were conducted within statutory requirements. Safeguarding discussions and meetings involved the right people and evidenced good working relationships with care management teams as well as key partners. Providers felt supported by the safeguarding team, their willingness to offer advice and guidance was appreciated.

The importance of timely hospital discharge is understood and remains a priority for the local authority and partners. During the pandemic, the local authority has sought to promote the well-being of people in need of care and support by creating additional capacity to facilitate safe discharges and to support people at home therefore avoiding unnecessary hospital admissions. The local authority has implemented the discharge to assess model and in the cases we reviewed we saw a focus on supporting people to regain their independence, enabling people to return home in accordance with their wishes.

Whilst the changing patterns of work in response to the pandemic has created challenges, the local authority has also been proactive and innovative in its approach to promoting people's well-being. During the assurance check, many positive examples of how the partnership responded to the pandemic were shared with us. This included promoting the well-being of people by loaning iPads to people to enable them to call family/friends, to attend online activities and access services such as virtual consultations with GP.

The local authority has continued to identify opportunities to use existing transformation programme to drive further integration as well as to develop new models of care and support to improve outcomes for people.

**Method:**

- we reviewed documentation supplied in advance of our visit
- we spoke with carers and people who were receiving or had received care and support
- we reviewed 26 case files
- we held case tracking discussions on a further ten case files
- we administered eight surveys
- we held six focus groups

**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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**Care Inspectorate Wales**