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Date: 04 November 2021

Dear Director,

Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) Performance Evaluation Inspection 2020-2021: Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council Social Services

This letter summarises the findings of our performance evaluation inspection on the 19 October to 23 October 2020. The purpose of this inspection was primarily 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 inspection 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.

The purpose of this inspection was to review how well the local authority continues to help and support adults and children with a focus on safety and well-being. 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, Well-Being, Partnerships and Integration.

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

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

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.

requirements made by Public Health Wales and Welsh Government to limit the spread of COVID-19?

The local authority is aware work is needed to ensure people are always enabled to have their voices heard and receive the care and support they need. We found a wide variation in the quality and content of written records when capturing the views of people. In adult services, we saw some good examples of reviews written in people's own words. Other case records demonstrated a lack of clarity about the outcomes people wished to achieve and were overly focused on need rather than strengths. To reduce inconsistencies managers must ensure the person's views are recorded, and agreed outcomes are articulated clearly.

Practitioners we spoke to expressed confidence children and adults in Merthyr Tydfil were safe. We found the local authority responded promptly to safeguarding concerns and appropriately prioritised risks to people's safety. The local authority has not embedded a preferred model of social work practice and assessments lacked a clear analysis of risks and protective factors and were not of a consistent quality. While the majority of assessments in children's services identify risk, more rigorous analysis including the impact on the child is needed. Care and support plans need to capture a clearer view of the child. There was limited evidence of direct work with children and families in the written record and this means the children's contribution and ability to influence services and planning is not easily identifiable.

The local authority is committed to delivering a service in the language of choice. We found the offer of assessments in Welsh being made when people first contact the local authority, and saw there are sufficient Welsh speaking social workers to ensure people's language preference is respected. We also found examples of interpreter services being used such as Mandarin, Polish and a sign language interpreter enabling people to participate more fully in their care and support. During the Covid pandemic we saw effective use of communication to maintain contact with people, for example in children's services statutory meetings were undertaken virtually. In adult services there were supportive befriending telephone calls to reduce social isolation in addition to creative use of direct payments to promote people's well-being.

The senior management team has focused on supporting staff during the pandemic by providing regular informal support, supervision and condensing guidance to 'one minute reads'. Staff generally reflected the view that senior managers are visible, responsive and focused on improving practice. We heard about a supportive culture where staff feel valued and positive for the future of Merthyr Tydfil. During the pandemic, elected members contacted staff to express thanks for their commitment. We heard about an approach named 'Passion 4 Practice' which seeks to use evidence based practice to support staff. We saw praise and encouragement of staff evident in the supervision folders.

Whilst carers assessments were offered the local authority accepts it has more to do to focus practice in this area and strengthen recording of people's outcomes. We heard there are plans for appointing carers workers in adult services. A carer's officer has been appointed in last few months.

Safely reducing the number of children looked after is a recognised priority for the local authority. We heard there is good support for corporate parenting across the council. The

small number of foster carers we spoke to reported excellent support from the fostering team, with regular training and access to social care qualifications. We heard mainly positive examples from young people about the support they had received from children looked after social workers, support workers and voluntary organisations. We also found encouraging examples of young people leaving care being supported into employment and living in appropriate accommodation. Some young people told us that planning for transitioning into adult services could have begun at an earlier stage.

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?

We heard about proportionate and consistent leadership and governance arrangements. Senior managers work collaboratively with partners to understand the needs of the population of Merthyr Tydfil and are focused on preventative approaches to respond to locally identified care and support needs. We saw examples of information, advice and assistance (IAA) being easily accessible with people signposted to preventative services. Staff in adult services informed us about the benefits of health and social services being co-located to work together to support people's outcomes, this was evident in discharge arrangements from hospital.

Practitioners informed us about people being supported by the General Practitioner Support Officer (GPSO) service, which aims to address people's social care needs as they attend their doctor's surgery. Information we received showed the main referrals are for anxiety and local authority staff expressed the view this support is an effective conduit between primary care and the local authority. At present there is continued recruitment to ensure the posts are filled.

During our inspection we saw people were supported to remain safely at home and access home support services without delay. People requiring residential care were suitably assessed for this provision. Due to an increase in incidents of positive Covid cases some care homes have been unable to accept people. Senior managers actively monitor this situation, prioritise requests and support people to access alternative care until a placement becomes available. During the pandemic the local authority has sought to promote the well-being of vulnerable people by creating additional capacity to support people at home. This has been achieved by re-locating staff from day care centres which were closed temporarily due to the pandemic.

In adult services, we saw positive examples of people accessing the reablement service and were supported to achieve their independence goals. We found timely response to requests for minor aids or adaptations but more complex requests requiring a Community Occupational Therapist (COT) had a waiting list. We saw evidence of reviews for people being delayed during the pandemic. This means for some people their needs were escalating. Managers are effectively utilising data to ensure waiting lists are kept to a minimum.

It is clear from the recent creation of the Supporting Change Team senior managers are prioritising the development of preventative services. The team are available to work until 9pm at night and their remit is to support children and families to overcome difficulties. We saw good examples of the team working with children and families in complex circumstances. Staff were overwhelmingly positive about the development of this

preventative service with some staff recognising the benefits to families of a flexible tiered support system. Staff told us the local authority is willing to innovate and practice new ideas or changes to continually improve. The changes to Families First moving into the social services directorate has been welcomed by managers to assist the local authority to support families at an earlier stage.

We saw instances where direct payment support to disabled children and their families were working well. Despite this the local authority recognises it needs to offer a broader range of support and choices to families. There is a well-established children with disabilities team in Merthyr Tydfil, whose workers know the children and families well. We were informed by the local authority that short breaks and respite provision are an area for development.

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 are working well at most levels in the organisation. The local authority has achieved additional strategic capacity as part of the work of the Improvement and Assurance Board. This has been welcomed by managers to ensure that the local authority has enhanced strategic direction. The strategic capacity has supported the local authority to make business cases for additional resource, such as an adult safeguarding practitioner in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). The local authority must continue to progress this to ensure it supports the good work happening at an operational and individual level. During our conversations with partners we were told about effective relationships where appropriate challenge was encouraged. This was evident in work we reviewed involving the MASH. There was consistent representation at multi-agency forums including the monthly supporting change panel. During the Covid-19 period there have been multiple joint meetings of Bronze command to support a shared approach to the pandemic. We heard about close liaison with schools facilitated by the children looked after education co-ordinator based in children's services. We observed panels which were well organised and an effective conduit to discuss and address issues. For instance the transition panel discussed young people suitable for the 'When I'm Ready' transition to 'Shared Lives' enabling them to remain in their current home for longer.

We heard from social work staff and managers about the challenges of supporting the emotional needs of children and a lack of agile mental health services available. This issue is not specific to the local authority and senior managers were actively working with their partners to design and deliver a regional therapeutic support service for children who are looked after. A further area for development is jointly commissioning support and placements for disabled children. The local authority has recognised partnership working with the health board as a priority for improving support for disabled children and their families.

Practitioners were committed to engaging with people using services and their families. There was evidence of 'what matters conversations' taking place and this supported detailed information gathering. The extent to which people are involved and equal partners in the design and delivery of care and support could be improved. Despite the good examples, practice was too inconsistent and in some instances reflected limited participation of the person themselves and their family. This meant personal outcomes were

not always well recorded and is an area for improvement. Consideration of wider support networks and contingency planning in case recording would also enhance understanding of the person and their experience.

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?

From the case files we saw the people of Merthyr Tydfil can be assured that their safety is promoted. There was a focus on safeguarding with all partners demonstrating a shared understanding of the new procedures. We found safeguarding concerns are responded to promptly and statutory duties were rarely missed. Whilst identification of risk was sound the analysis of how to manage risks in the context of a person's well-being was not always well evidenced and the authority recognises this as an area for improvement. The voice of the person at risk also needs to be better heard and reflected in assessment and care plans.

Whilst we saw evidence of effective safeguarding of people we could not always clearly see in the recording how enquiries and investigations are conducted and this requires further work. There was certainly frequent activity in case recordings but sometimes a lack of focus as to what outcomes are being worked towards. The cases would benefit from more stringent management oversight to ensure clearer outcomes for people.

The local authority has developed a number of quality assurance mechanisms including communication meetings to examine areas of good practice and disseminate any lessons learned. The senior management team undertake regular audit work to identify themes and provide direct feedback to practitioners. The authority recognises in adult services more work is needed to strengthen quality assurance.

In children's services we found communication between independent reviewing officers (IRO) and local authority was not always fluent. The local authority must take account of the significance of the IRO role in monitoring the performance of the local authority as a corporate parent and in taking forward personal outcomes for a child or young person. We identified an increasing number of children subject to Placement with Parent (PWP) regulations. Staff were not always assured how these arrangements enhanced the necessary safeguards for vulnerable children living with their families. Staff told us there were conflicting views between the local authority and court officers about care and support plans. The local authority has identified posts in the Supporting Change team to review PWP arrangements.

Service delivery has been sustained during the pandemic period with some teams continuing to work from offices (safely) and through virtual working. We heard of a positive increase in the attendance of partners at virtual safeguarding meetings. We found social workers undertaking child protection visits face-to-face and facilitating contact with Covid-19 risk assessments completed.

The local authority gives regard to the rights of children to be offered formal advocacy. From the information provided, we found good evidence that children were being referred to advocacy services during the Covid pandemic. Whilst staff recognised the importance of parents and family as advocates for their children, the relevance of formal advocacy and the active offer needs to be embedded in every day practice.

There is a welcome focus on workforce development with a recognition that a regional arrangement has improved the variety of training available to social work staff. Caseloads were described by staff and managers generally as busy but mostly manageable. Many practitioners have the skills and knowledge necessary to work to engage with families and feel supported to do so. Workers are able to engage meaningfully with people with the aim to ensure children are raised by their families and older people can remain at home for as long as possible. We heard positive feedback from people about the social work practice in teams and also found in our interviews experienced and skilled staff in post.

Method:

- we reviewed documentation supplied in advance of our visit
- we spoke with 23 carers and 11 people who were receiving or had received care and support
- we reviewed 30 files
- we held 15 case tracking interviews with staff
- we held 9 focus groups
- we administered a survey to social services employees
- we administered a survey to parent and carers of disabled children
- we administered a survey to people who had experience of care and support

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 inspection and to those people and staff who spoke with us.

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Yours sincerely,



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