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Dear Chief Officer,

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

This letter summarises the findings of our assurance check on 22 February to 26 February 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 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 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. Our key lines of enquiry were focused on the four principles of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014. We have aligned our findings to the four principles: People - Voice and Control, Prevention, Well-being, Partnerships and Integration.

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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.

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 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?

The local authority has made clear its strategic intent in relation to responding to the COVID-19 pandemic (the pandemic). At the outset of the pandemic, the local authority introduced a revised purpose and eight new strategic aims to provide clarity and ensure accountability through the period. This includes an aim to help vulnerable young people and adults who need support. Leaders have maintained a line of sight on the changing COVID-19 landscape resulting in clear plans to address the issues presented. This has led to creative and responsive practice. Senior managers continue to keep under review what is working well, and different ways of working because of the pandemic, which they intend to take forward. We identified an encouraging culture of staff working together to the same common aim. This was summed up by one staff member who talked about an “*all in this together*” culture within Monmouthshire.

Like many councils the local authority is seeing and anticipating an increase in complexity of need and demand for services. They are looking at the horizon ahead and senior leaders have commenced work on scoping the future needs of the community. They are continuing to work collaboratively with partners to build and support community resilience.

People we spoke with told us the local authority had maintained contact with them throughout the pandemic. We saw examples of staff using e-mail, WhatsApp, video meetings, holding virtual lunches and picnics, as ways of maintaining contact and safely engaging with people.

Young people who had left care spoke positively about the support they had received from their personal advisors. They told us they had been provided with laptops to assist them in maintaining contact, reducing isolation and to assist with continuing with their studies, during the pandemic. They described how they had been supported to access suitable accommodation, employment and continuing education.

The local authority had been proactive in its response to the challenges created by the pandemic. Systems were quickly put in place to support increased agile and remote working, where possible. Where needed, direct face-to-face contact with people had continued, subject to risk assessment, and staff were provided with personal protective equipment (PPE).

Staff told us their workloads were manageable and they felt well supported by managers and colleagues to do their job. They said managers had been responsive and visible during the pandemic. Overall, we found staff morale was very good.

We heard how the development of the workforce had been maintained as far as possible during the pandemic. Training opportunities had continued with a number of digital platforms used to enable staff to access on-line training. Learning and development updates had been provided to staff through weekly newsletters.

The local authority is committed to fully embedding a strengths and outcome focused approach. In adult services, there is a focus on transforming practice through a relationships and place-based working approach.¹ Work is underway to maximise the place-based opportunities of working across social services, third sector, and primary and community health services etc., with the aim of achieving a fully integrated approach based on working with communities and for the people in those communities.

In children's services, there is on-going implementation of an approach that combines a risk assessment framework alongside a collaborative communication approach.

Overall, we found people's voices were heard, their choices respected and people routinely achieved self-identified outcomes. People were able to communicate in their preferred language. The Welsh language Active Offer was being promoted. The quality of assessments and care and support plans seen were varied. Some of the documentation reviewed did not always reflect the positive work being undertaken. We saw some examples where a more explicit focus on strengths would have been beneficial in providing a holistic view of the person and their individual circumstances.

Safely reducing the number of children looked after is a recognised priority for the local authority. Senior managers and officers have a good understanding and knowledge of the profile of children looked after and are strongly committed to the preventative agenda. We heard there was good support for corporate parenting across the local authority, this was evident in the scrutiny committee reports we reviewed.

We heard how the Achieving Change Together team was working with children who are on the edge of care. Providing intensive support to children and their families to support the children to remain living with their family, wherever possible. The commitment to continue to develop services to prevent children coming into the care of the local authority was evident in the scrutiny committee reports we reviewed.

Carers' needs are considered, assessed and documented separately to those of the cared for person. We saw examples of how carers had been supported during the pandemic. Providers told us how they had been supported by the local authority "*to creatively and flexibly support carers with what they need.*" They told us they had been able to adapt and change their service at very short notice to support carers differently from the normal service delivery plans; for example, outreach work so that carers "*did not miss out on a break.*"

¹ The local authority describes place-based working as a way of working that builds a network of community support to help people remain connected to things that matter to them supporting their health and well-being. By bringing a range of agencies together with a shared purpose of supporting people's well-being enables the sharing of skills, expertise, time and increase the opportunities for people to access support in the community without needing formal services.

During the pandemic, trying to identify carers including young carers through the usual community networks had proved challenging for the local authority. Staff identified how this may lead to crisis within the caring role and so took action to reinvigorate the Monmouthshire Carers Project Facebook page to highlight the support available to carers. A young carers and young adult carer assessment worker role had also been created to strengthen the service provided to carers.

We saw examples of the use of advocates in facilitating the voice of the person. We also found examples where advocacy was not evident nor underpinned by an agreement on whether advocacy was required. The offer and provision of advocacy is not only important in ensuring that people have their voice heard, it also helps to ensure people's rights are promoted and protected.

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 found a positive integrated approach to a culture of prevention through joint working, supportive infrastructures across social and health care, and aligned delivery systems.

The local authority had established 'front door' arrangements described by staff as responsive, proportionate and holding expertise regarding preventative services.

We found the provision of information advice and assistance continues to grow across Monmouthshire, with the number of access points expanding not just within social care and health but also across other sectors.

In children's services we identified the early help panel as a good example of how the local authority and its partners strive to ensure the right help is available at the right time. This helps prevent escalation of need, reducing need for increased or formal support from statutory agencies, and improving the quality of a child's/family's journey through the health and social care system. The multi-agency panel had focus on the best outcomes for the child and their family and identifying the most appropriate services/support for the child and their family. The panel provides a positive multi-agency 'no wrong door' approach to supporting families.

We saw a parenting advice and support line had been set up, and between the periods March - September 2020, there had been 154 calls made to the line. A Virtual Autism Advice and Online Service had also been set up, which was a collaboration between Aneurin Bevan University Health Board (ABUHB) and the local authority. These are just two positive examples of services put in place during the pandemic to support people's well-being.

At the beginning of the pandemic the local authority linked up with the Community Development and Partnership Team to screen people on the adult social services database before contacting them to find out whether they required any support with food and or medication collection. The people contacted were those who had previous contact with the local authority and those people on the shielded list. Nearly 3000 people were contacted over a two to three week period. The team utilised volunteer groups to provide support. This is a good example of identifying and understanding people's needs, and making the best uses of resources to meet these during the pandemic.

We saw and heard of how various professionals within the adult integrated teams worked collaboratively to support people's well-being and safety. We saw evidence of bespoke individualised equipment provided to support people's independence, well-being and safety. This enabled people to be supported at home and whenever possible, avoiding the need for admission to hospital or residential care.

Our review of case files found generally there was timely and proportionate interventions to support prevention of escalation of need and risk, taking in to account individual wishes. Practitioners from adults and children's services told us there was a focus on preventative services in the local authority, with the availability of step down and community resources to support people's well-being and safety.

Children at potential risk of child sexual exploitation or criminal exploitation are protected by proactive multi agency interventions. The focus is on reducing risk and helping children to recognise signs of exploitation so that they can better protect themselves. The local authority believe child exploitation is now better recognised, and are working to raise the profile and response to criminal exploitation. We saw the number of children identified as potentially being at risk of exploitation had significantly increased with 33 children identified during the 12 month period April 2019 – March 2020 and 39 children identified in the 6 month period April 2020 – September 2020.

Recruitment of fosters carers has continued throughout the pandemic, as has the regional work relating to improving placement provision for children. The local authority recognises the need to develop its 'When I am ready' arrangements. A task group had been developed with housing partners to look at support and accommodation needs of young people and this is an area we will continue to monitor.

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 delivering an integrated sustainable approach to meeting need and promoting well-being in line with legislation.

On an individual level, we saw examples of good working relationships between professionals and people receiving care and or support. Practice presented as respectful and we saw efforts made by staff to understand people's circumstances and to support people to meet their own personal outcomes.

There is a clear commitment to collaborative working across Monmouthshire, we heard from representatives from health, police, education and the third sector who spoke very positively about the relationships and partnership working with the local authority.

Evidence of effective partnership was seen in the case files we reviewed and the meetings we attended. We saw shared commitment and collaboration between the local authority and partner agencies at an operational level across children's and adults services. We found a strong emphasis on professional disciplines working together. Resources from a range of sources were being aligned and utilised to meet personal outcomes. We saw how partner organisations were supporting care and support planning and safeguarding processes.

Information was appropriately and promptly shared by agencies; this enabled the local authority to gain an understanding of people's circumstances; this was particularly important in responding to risk.

Providers spoke very positively of the support they had received from the local authority during the pandemic. The comments received from providers highlighted they had received timely advice and support; there had been good communication and positive meetings with the local authority during the pandemic. They told us during the pandemic the local authority had remained committed to providing effective and safe support to children and adults. They said there was a culture of working collaboratively and making decisions together. We heard how relationships had been strengthened during the pandemic.

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?

During the pandemic, the local authority had continued to exercise its functions under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014, ensuring it makes a positive contribution to the well-being of people who need care and support and carers who need support.

At an individual level, we saw efforts made to maintain contact with people, with statutory visits and meetings taking place virtually but also some risk assessed face-to-face contact where required and appropriate.

We saw evidence of care and support plans being developed in a timely manner and reviewed in accordance with requirements. Generally, we saw prompt responses to any identified risk.

We saw how the measurement of personal outcomes was being embedded within the adult social care teams. The quality and progress of recording personal outcomes is being monitored so that this can develop into a more robust measure of progress in future. In children's services, we were told how the 'distance travelled tool' was used to measure and track achievements.

The importance of timely intervention and hospital discharge is understood and remains a priority for the local authority and its partners. The increase in demand for services as a result of the pandemic had resulted in waiting lists for some services, for example occupational therapy and reablement. There was a system in place to manage and prioritise referrals. The local authority had identified the fragility of the social care sector and the availability of care, particularly domiciliary support as a key risk. The pandemic has added a further complication to what was already a challenging area. The domiciliary care sector within Monmouthshire remains under considerable pressure. The local authority has specific challenges due to rurality and demographics. Prior to the pandemic, the local authority had been working with providers to develop better ways of creating a sustainable way forward. This work was paused due to the pandemic and has been identified as a matter of priority in the coming year. This is an area we will continue to monitor.

The local authority recognises the need to expand the uptake of direct payments. They are exploring how they can remove barriers to people accessing direct payments.

The newly implemented safeguarding hub and the strengthening of the adult safeguarding team are positive developments in promoting and protecting people's well-being and safety. Improvements are required in relation to the number of adult safeguarding enquiries

completed within seven days, recording of analysis of risk, timeliness and oversight of non-criminal investigations.

Management oversight was not evident in the adult safeguarding records viewed. We were told a plan was in place to develop data so that adult safeguarding can be accurately monitored and reported on.

Appropriate, multi-agency information sharing and involvement was consistently evident in the safeguarding files we reviewed.

The safeguarding interventions reviewed in children's services evidenced child-centred work promptly undertaken to develop an understanding of what life was like for the child. We saw effective panel arrangements supporting decision-making and oversight.

Method:

- we reviewed documentation supplied by the local authority
- we spoke with people who were receiving or had received care and support, including 5 young people who had left care
- we reviewed 35 case files
- we held ten case tracking interviews with staff
- we administered surveys to; people who had experience of care and support, providers, third sector organisations, staff, healthcare professionals
- we attended the early help panel
- we attended an adult services provider meeting
- we attended the Monmouthshire integrated services partnership board
- we met with representatives from the police, education department, third sector

Next Steps

We have identified strengths and areas for improvement. 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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