Arolygiaeth Gofal Cymru
Care Inspectorate Wales

NATIONAL OVERVIEW REPORT ASSURANCE CHECKS

Children and Adult Social Services

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MAE'R DDOGFEN YMA HEFYD AR GAEL YN GYMRAEG
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FOREWORD

This report highlights the findings of a series of Care Inspectorate Wales' (CIW) inspection and performance review activities across Welsh local authorities, undertaken between September 2020 and July 2021. Our findings include performance review activity undertaken using a range of tools such as performance evaluation inspection and assurance checks. For ease we will refer throughout this report to all performance evaluation and inspection activity as assurance checks.

This was a time when people across Wales were living through the unprecedented challenges of COVID-19. We know the impact of COVID-19 has been worse for certain groups of people than in the general population; black and minority ethnic communities, people living in socioeconomically deprived areas, those working in health and social care, and those who require care in their own homes or a care home. Sadly many people lost their lives. No one's life has been unchanged but the pandemic illuminated the vital role of the social care sector in supporting people in most need of protection in our society. The hope now is the sector's raised profile continues to enhance the public's understanding of the value of good quality care and support.

In March 2020, as infection rates increased and Wales entered the first lockdown, we suspended our programme of routine performance review activity to enable local authorities to focus fully on responding to the challenging circumstances. Instead, we developed new ways of working which reflected the need for us to engage in more supportive relationships with local authorities.

This included ongoing review, monitoring and engagement with senior leaders in local authorities, in addition to stakeholder meetings across Wales. We were mindful of our assurance role and aware at this time, more than ever, it was essential for us to seek reassurance on behalf of the public, about people's safety and well-being. This was balanced against the need to reduce the risk of infection and not create any additional pressures for local authorities.

From September 2020, we began a revised programme of assurance checks. We used information and intelligence gathered throughout the year to consider the strengths and risks in each local authority so we could focus on areas where our work could make the biggest difference. The aim was to understand how local authorities were continuing to safeguard people and promote their well-being during the pandemic. Putting people first is a key principle of our approach.

The voice of people using services being central to our work and the methods we adopted.

For children and young people in the care of the local authority, the pandemic reduced their usual support and activities. We recognised this specific risk to their well-being and therefore, in addition to asking about the impact of the pandemic on people, we asked questions in each local authority about children in care, the findings of which are detailed in this report.

Our starting point was to identify positive practice which delivers good outcomes for people. We looked for strengths but also highlighted opportunities for local authorities to improve.

Across our assurance check activities we spoke to over 800 people who work in, work with or experience social care services. We heard many stories of how positive outcomes were achieved for people when local authorities offered co-ordinated support with local health boards (LHBs) and other partners. We saw communities and volunteers targeting help at a time when many people's usual support networks, such as day services, had been paused or significantly reduced. We were humbled by stories of individual staff commitment to deliver support in the face of overwhelming difficulties. The emotional strain on people working in social care responding to the demands was clear to all of our inspectors. Responding to a challenge on this scale has certainly taken its toll but we found overwhelming commitment to continuing to support all people in need of care and protection from across the social care sector workforce.

We would like to thank the many children and adults who spoke with us, for giving up their time so generously and sharing their experiences. We acknowledge the overwhelming pressures local authorities have faced in providing care and support. They have engaged positively with us and embraced our programme even at the most challenging stages of the pandemic. I cannot end without again expressing admiration and thanks for the exceptional dedication of all social care staff across Wales.

G. Baranski

GILLIAN BARANSKI

CHIEF INSPECTOR,
CARE INSPECTORATE WALES

FUTURE CHALLENGES

Unprecedented increase in demand for social care

There are growing concerns for the significant increases in demand across the social care sector creating unprecedented pressure on social services. We are aware many local authorities are experiencing an increase in the volume of safeguarding referrals. We also know many people have delayed requesting services, or there has been breakdown of care during the pandemic. Often as a consequence people's situations have deteriorated resulting in services experiencing a substantially more complex range of presenting issues. These demands are placing additional pressure upon caseloads, which puts an already tired, depleted and finite workforce under significant pressure, and results in delayed assessments and increased waiting lists. Partnership working can become strained under this pressure which could undo the good work seen during the pandemic. Services adapted very quickly to respond to the challenges of COVID-19, but as restrictions ease, local authorities are facing additional demands. It has now become a major challenge for local authorities to consider how services can most effectively be configured and funded to meet these demands and ensure sustainability.

Partnership working

The benefits of strong partnership working between health, social care and wider public services to create a whole system approach have been clearly demonstrated during the pandemic. So many barriers were overcome by working together. System improvements are needed to ensure we see this work continue. This will ensure sustainable shared outcomes for people and prevent regression to working in isolation, where the balance of funding and partnership working divisions becomes greater and risks people falling through gaps.

Recruitment and retention

Workforce recruitment and retention in social care is at crisis point. If this is not addressed at a national level, local authorities risk not meeting their statutory duties. The impact on the lives of people using services could result in eligible needs being unmet due to limited support and lack of choice. Sufficiency of suitably qualified practitioners was a national concern prior to the pandemic. COVID-19 has created a perfect storm, drastically altering the stability of the social care workforce. Local authorities are working hard to address the staffing crisis. For example, we heard of some departments, where there were particular recruitment challenges, engaging with agencies to retain stable practitioner cover: we heard about 'grow your own' approach, which supports existing social care workers to qualify as social workers. A future challenge may be sufficiency of experienced staff to supervise newly qualified workers.

Fragility within domiciliary support services

The pandemic has further confirmed fragility within parts of the care sector. It is now time to address unnecessary complexity in order to increase the focus on quality and person-centred care. Rebalancing care and support (2021) proposes that current arrangements for social care need to be strengthened and re-aligned in response to the range of challenges facing the sector, and to achieve the vision for social care set out in the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014. Based on what we found there is a clear lack of domiciliary support capacity in Wales. We heard the impact of this is care packages being returned to the local authority, increased pressure on unpaid carers, people placed on long waiting lists, and some people going without care and/or staying in hospital longer. Local authorities will need to consider the sustainability of care providers in the context of the resources available.

If radical reform of the social care sector does not occur there is an inherent risk of spiralling costs, with longer term support not meeting the needs of those requiring care and support. Local authorities will also need to consider the impact of 'Long COVID', and understand how this impacts on people receiving care and support, unpaid carers and the social care workforce. Research indicates long COVID is more prevalent in older people. Local authorities will need to work with their partners to diversify and commission different types of services using the All Wales Community Pathway for Long COVID.

Placement insufficiency within the childcare sector

Children are needing support at a much younger age due to the emotional and behavioural impact of abusive experiences. Residential care and foster care placements are difficult to access for those children and young people with the most complex emotional and behavioural problems. As a result children and young people are often being placed far from home and sometimes outside of Wales. Welsh Government's commitment to the reduction of looked after children and aspiration and commitment towards reducing and ultimately ending profit making in children's care services aims to rebalance the sector. However, in the short term this initiative could bring further fragility within the sector with the need for local authorities to scope out an approach utilising partnership working to shape the market to build sustainable capacity.

Advocacy

Based on what we saw independent advocacy to support people to be heard and in control of their lives needs to be consistently made available to ensure this valuable service is actively promoted.

Support for Carers

Carers are a critical partner in care and, can be eligible for support whether or not the person they care for has eligible needs. We found inconsistencies in carers being routinely offered assessments and the quality of assessments completed. Where people had been supported during the pandemic we found this had a positive impact on their well-being therefore support from the local authority is beneficial to people in a caring role. However, the need for further development is recognised by local authorities to improve engagement with carers and consistently offer assessments. This will help to ensure services are co-produced based on a relationship of equals between practitioners, people who need care and support and carers who need support.

Grant funding

We heard of the impact and growing concern for service continuity if grants are not sustained. Uncertainty with short-term funding streams are affecting both children and adult provision. Ministers have approved a new five-year revenue investment fund commencing April 2022 to build on the work and learning of the Integrated Care Fund and Transformation Fund used to develop services for the most complex adults, children and young people. This provides sustainable longer-term funding which in turn provides assurance to all who are developing specific placement provision. Local authorities can begin longer-term planning and development of services.

CIW recognises we all need to work towards and continue to concentrate efforts on the 'whole system' approach, putting people and children at the centre and surrounding them with resilient, local primary and community care social services that are sufficient to meet needs and link seamlessly.

We pay tribute to the social services workforce in Wales for their dedication in caring for people, and their hard work during the COVID-19 pandemic, which continues to disrupt and bring major challenges. As Wales emerges from the pandemic, there are opportunities to reshape and reform services but also future challenges will need to be carefully managed to ensure Together we can Keep Wales Safe[1].

[1] Drakeford, M. MS First Minister. 3 July 2020. Written statement: Review of Lockdown Measures and The Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Wales) Regulations 2020.

OUR APPROACH

Between September 2020 and July 2021 we completed 19 assurance checks across Wales. This report details our findings.

For the six months immediately prior to the pandemic our work had focused on the experiences of disabled children and their families. We had completed inspection activity in three local authorities and also collated self-evaluations. Due to the importance of this work, and the effect of the pandemic on this particular group, we completed this work as part of our revised programme in eight local authorities. The findings from the work with disabled children and their families will be detailed in a separate report to be published shortly.

The four principles of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 provided a framework for all our assurance checks:

- **People - voice and control**

  How well are local authorities ensuring people, carers and practitioners are having their voices heard, making informed choices, and maintaining control over their lives?

- **Prevention**

  To what extent are local authorities successful in promoting prevention and reducing need for increased or formal support from statutory agencies?

- **Partnerships and Integration**

  To what extent are local authorities able to assure themselves opportunities for partnership working during the pandemic are positively exploited

- **Well-being**

  To what extent are local authorities promoting well-being, ensuring people maintain their safety and achieve positive outcomes that matter to them?

Within this framework we asked specifically the following two over-arching questions:

01. How well are local authorities discharging their statutory functions to keep people who need care and support and carers who need support, safe and promote their well-being during the pandemic?

02. What are local authorities 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?

We took a pragmatic, flexible and risk based approach, working closely with local authorities to identify methods which best reflected the prevailing environment. We ensured a duty of care undertaking all activity virtually; we met with people online or used the telephone and accessed case files remotely.

Our findings derived from a number of methods including; reviewing case files, focus groups, interviews and surveys. We spoke with social services leaders, managers and practitioners and their partners as well as listening to adults and children and their families/carers (see appendix 1).

SUMMARY
KEY FINDINGS

SUMMARY | KEY FINDINGS

People VOICE AND CONTROL

- Voices Heard and Choices respected
- Committed Management and Dedicated Workforce
- Advocacy
- Workforce Capacity

Voices heard and choices respected

Throughout Wales we found adult's and children's voices are mostly heard, their choices respected and self-identified outcomes are often achieved. We found practitioners excelled at building trusting relationships with adults and children, supporting them to identify what matters to them most.

Committed management and dedicated workforce

Managers and staff demonstrated an ability to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances throughout the pandemic. There is no doubt that social services staff at all levels 'went the extra mile' to keep what mattered to people central to their practice and worked tirelessly to ensure the least possible disruption to services despite COVID-19 restrictions.

Advocacy

The offer of advocacy to children looked after and their parents/carers could be strengthened. Many children and/or parents or carers did not fully appreciate the significance of the help being offered.

Workforce capacity

We found recruitment and retention of skilled and experienced social workers is problematic in many areas; both rural and urban local authorities. Recruitment to children's services social work roles in particular continues to be challenging.

Prevention

- Prevention and Early Help
- Commitment to Reducing Children Looked After
- Carers
- Service Capacity

Prevention and early help approaches embedding well

We found social services prevention and early help approaches becoming embedded into practice. These approaches supported a national drive across all Welsh authorities to meet the needs of communities to ensure services become sustainable.

Reducing the numbers of children looked after is a high priority for local authorities across Wales

Reducing the numbers of children looked after and returning them home to parents, or discharging care orders, is a high priority for all social services in Wales. The best outcomes were seen where children had stable placements meeting their needs and supporting their long-term goals.

Not all carers were sufficiently supported during the pandemic

Many of the services carers rely on understandably stopped operating during the pandemic. Although we found examples of carers being offered support, we were told by some carers they felt abandoned and the impact on some had been severe leading to the breakdown of care arrangements.

Capacity of services insufficient to keep pace with demand

The challenges brought about by COVID-19 have undoubtedly increased pressure on the capacity of services to provide adults and children with choices about the type/volume of care and support needed to promote independence and safety.

Partnerships and Integration

- Collaborative Partnership
- Supportive Commissioners
- Digital Platforms
- Mental Health Support

Partners worked collaboratively throughout the pandemic

During the pandemic we found an increased commitment to collaborative working between local authorities and partners. We generally found positive improvements in working relationships between health and social care at points of crisis during the pandemic. A major strength across Wales was the effort of volunteers and community support groups to help people during the pandemic.

Local authorities are supportive commissioners

Communication, engagement and support between local authorities, people, partners, commissioners and providers of services was enhanced during the pandemic. There was certainly a spirit of 'all hands to the pump' to ensure support was maintained within the COVID-19 restrictions.

Digital Platforms do not support practice

All local authorities reported difficulties using the Welsh Community Care Information System (WCCIS) system. We heard repeatedly about routine issues with accessing and uploading information.

Insufficient mental health support for children

There remains a lack of mental health support for adults, children and young people in local authorities across Wales. We heard thresholds for access to services are high, interventions short, and of withdrawal of support during times where risk of harm is extremely high.

Well-being

- Well-being Promoted
- Safeguarding
- Record Keeping
- Assessments and Reviews

People were supported to maintain and promote their well-being

We found many good examples of local authorities supporting people to maintain and promote their well-being. We found people were often active participants in designing their own care and support packages and positive direct work with many children continued throughout the pandemic.

Safeguarding statutory duties sustained during pandemic

We saw good evidence of safeguarding practices in children and adult services across Wales in line with statutory requirements, and with appropriate practitioners and representatives of relevant partner agencies attending safeguarding meetings.

Poor record keeping undermines practice

In the majority of local authorities, case records reviewed did not reflect the positive practice being undertaken; in particular, some of the imaginative direct work undertaken with people was absent from the records.

Quality and timeliness of assessments and reviews

We found the quality of care and support assessments and plans could be improved in many areas. Assessments and plans could benefit from more clearly detailing what actions are required in order to ensure that people's outcomes are met and measurable.

KEY FINDINGS

Safety and well-being in children and adult services

SAFETY AND WELL-BEING IN CHILDREN AND ADULT SERVICES

How well are local authorities discharging their statutory functions to keep people who need care and support and carers who need support, safe and promote their well-being during the pandemic?

People VOICE AND CONTROL

We asked:

How well are local authorities 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?

KEY FINDING

People's voices heard and choices respected

Many people, including prospective service users and/or carers as well as professionals, told us it was easy to contact local authorities; most people said they felt listened to and were treated with dignity and respect. We found most local authorities were pro-active in making the 'Active Offer'[2] and many services were delivered in the language of choice. Additionally, where needed, local authorities have developed expertise to engage and communicate with specific communities through use of interpreters or, for example, the safe transfer of unaccompanied asylum seeking children from one authority to another.

In all local authorities across both children and adult services, we found that issues of consent, advocacy, and mental capacity were considered in a timely manner. We found people were usually offered advocacy services and in some local authorities we saw evidence of a small number of people being supported both formally and informally by an advocate. However, in many areas the provision of advocacy was not evident.

Practice

In Ceredigion, we saw formal advocacy being appropriately sought for a child looked after in relation to bereavement and finances.

Throughout Wales we found people's voices are mostly heard, their choices respected and self-identified outcomes are often achieved. We found practitioners excelled at building trusting relationships with people, supporting them to identify what matters to them. In some local authorities we found a culture of co-production; co-operation and shared understanding of what matters.

We found good ongoing working relationships between professionals and people receiving care and/or care and support. Practitioners were open and honest about options available to people. In the best cases we saw people included in decision- making, for example, parents' attendance at legal meetings, conferences and reviews. We heard many positive responses from parents, individuals and carers about the support they received from local authorities.

[2] Providing a service in Welsh without someone having to ask for it

People VOICE AND CONTROL

A carer in Bridgend described the support provided to her and her relative as "tremendous" and went on to say how the support had benefitted their well-being.

A parent in Blaenau Gwent told us how support from a worker had helped them improve their parenting skills and standard of care they offered their child – she "helps us focus on behaviour and responses and relationships. Different house now. Much happier family.

(Occupational Therapist) spoke to me about what would be useful... (And they provided) shower room, rails, stair lift, raisers, steps, community alarm - helped me a lot. Didn't have to wait a long time for the equipment. Very helpful to me for getting around and keeping me safe. I have carers every day – very useful. Very satisfied with this service. Consistent carers.... had some residential reablement – whilst they were completing the work in my property... She got me back on my feet. The LA has done everything well. Nothing they could do better (Adult from Monmouthshire).

We heard from an adult with a learning disability in Carmarthenshire about how he had benefitted from the support of a social worker who arranged for him to have technological support through "lifeline". This contributed to him feeling safe and to remain independent as if he needed any help he would be able to press the pendant to call for help.

Happy with support from social worker. She is helping a lot – been good - get on well with her...Easy to contact. Only got to phone - secretary passes message onto her. Gets back to me...Good at getting in touch with other agencies to get support needed. Got lifeline –she helped to get that...Feel positive about support given – would score it highly (Adult from Carmarthenshire).

People VOICE AND CONTROL

In local authorities where a clear social work model had been adopted to provide a practice framework, we saw a strong focus on people's progress and experiences and quality assurance processes that measured the impact of the model. Although the extent to which formalised practice models were embedded across Wales varied, in all local authorities person-centred, strength-based collaborative approaches were evident with many people supported to identify personal outcomes and co-produce plans to achieve these. For example, we saw many local authorities providing information to people about the availability of direct payments. This enabled individuals to exercise choice and control in deciding how to meet their care and support needs, or carers support needs and their outcomes. Some local authorities had developed fast track systems for direct payments and in many areas these payments were used creatively during the pandemic.

Practice

Innovatively in Flintshire, the local authority's website specifically related to direct payments and personal assistants. A register aims to help citizens and their families search for personal assistants and vice versa as well as "advertising" for personal assistants to develop their skills.

Local authorities were innovative in their response to maintaining safe contact with people during the pandemic

Throughout Wales we found social services had clear plans in place to address the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. It was positive to find significant and consistent evidence of local authorities responding promptly during the pandemic to ensure lines of communication remained open. We saw many examples of innovative practice to maintain safe contact with people to enable financial, emotional and practical support to be delivered efficiently.

We found the use of technology proved to be significant not only in maintaining contact and ensuring communication but in the continuation of provision of care and support, including statutory services to individuals. Different professionals within the local authorities, as well as professionals from partner agencies, quickly adapted to the new ways of technological working. Local authorities connected with people through telephones but also through other virtual means, such as Facebook, Zoom, Microsoft Teams and WhatsApp. We saw many examples of local authorities adapting to new ways of working by providing technological equipment such as smart phones and iPads directly to people to call family/friends, to attend online activities, and access services such as virtual consultations with General Practitioners.

People VOICE AND CONTROL

Learning

Engaging with charities proved to be effective

Newport City Council worked with a local charity to redistribute refurbished iPads and laptops to young people.

Technology was successful in providing support when face-to-face meetings were not possible

Pre-pandemic Dementia Actif Gwynedd provided 'DementiaGo' physical activity classes in the community for people with dementia, older adults to reduce the risk of developing dementia, and for family, friends and carers. People benefitted from being active and being part of their community, supported by person-centred instructors. Such activities increase participants confidence, well-being and provide an opportunity to socialise thus reducing the risk of social isolation. Innovatively, 'DementiaGo' was subsequently held virtually and people were able to partake at home to maintain their physical and emotional well-being.

Alternate provision to front line services provides good support and innovative preventative services to divert pressure from front line services

Rhondda Cynon Taf introduced a mobile responder service aimed at preventing calls to emergency services and provided outreach support and play activity packs to people in their own homes

People VOICE AND CONTROL

KEY FINDING

Committed management and dedicated workforce

All local authorities, supported by commissioned external provider services, including the third sector must be commended for the support they offered their entire social care workforce including senior leaders, elected members, managers and staff. Our staff surveys and conversations with staff during fieldwork evidenced that senior leaders were visible and accessible and staff felt fully supported throughout the pandemic. Managers and staff demonstrated an ability to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances, as many local authorities took a whole workforce approach to manage issues arising due to pandemic. For example, greater use of flexible working arrangements, new duty systems, and for some, re-deployment to work in independent care homes during times of staff absence linked to COVID-19.

There is no doubt social services staff at all levels 'went the extra mile' to keep what mattered to people central to their practice and worked tirelessly to ensure the least possible disruption to services despite COVID-19 restrictions.

Practice

In Ceredigion, we heard how people who misuse substances often did not have access to online services, and therefore mobile phones were provided during the pandemic which assisted with communication and provision of support. This undoubtedly combatted isolation for some people as the availability of face-to-face support services were decreasing.

Across Wales, most staff we spoke with reported that although tired, their morale was high and they felt their contributions were valued. Many others reported a supportive culture within the service in which they worked and that, on the whole, the adapted digital communication systems deployed throughout the pandemic were effective in sustaining support.

Regularity and frequency of formal supervision was maintained throughout the pandemic for most social work staff and the use of digital platforms also enabled effective informal supervision and peer support in many areas.

Practice

Newly qualified social workers in Flintshire and in Caerphilly reported they had been supported and inducted effectively with no disruption to enhanced supervision, protected caseloads or mentoring arrangements. Similarly, there were positive examples of students being able to continue with their training and work placements and being able to take advantage of learning experiences, such as through socially distance observations of practice.

People VOICE AND CONTROL

Team meetings also moved online, and in many areas, were adapted in terms of frequency and content to more effectively manage the rapidly changing environment and provide additional staff support. In most areas, workforce development and staff training was also digitally maintained throughout the pandemic.

In some local authorities further support was achieved through mentoring groups and peer supervision sessions, which provided an opportunity for practitioners to reflect on casework issues and identify potential responses to challenges. Notwithstanding the current unprecedented increase in demand for social services across many areas, most staff we asked said caseloads had remained manageable and management oversight was sufficient during the pandemic period. In a few areas, more robust arrangements to quality assure, monitor and prioritise workloads would have been beneficial.

We saw many examples of the ways in which the well-being of staff was promoted. For example, through confidential counselling, well-being and mindfulness sessions, and self-referral mechanisms to occupational health services as well as online team fun activities such as quizzes. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) was made available for staff when required.

> **The world of social work was very different than I had imagined, in the covid world. Training, supervision and team meetings are all virtual. It will be good to meet them all face to face.**
>
> Newly qualified social worker

Practice

- In Flintshire, similar to many other local authorities, staff appreciated the flexible approach they had to manage both their professional workload as well as their personal circumstances including accommodation of home-schooling. The availability of the team manager after 4pm on Fridays was also valued for support and guidance. Staff morale was also maintained through celebration of good work achieved virtually.
- In Caerphilly, staff appreciated that well-being and active learning was a standing item on the team meeting agenda where there was a consistent focus on staff well-being. Staff were able to access Care First, an Employee Assistance Programme, which one staff member described as a “great resource”.

People VOICE AND CONTROL

KEY FINDING

Workforce capacity

In all local authorities it was recognised how recruitment and retention of staff is a business critical priority. Nevertheless, we found recruitment and retention of skilled and experienced social workers problematic in many areas; both rural and urban local authorities. We found recruitment to children's services social work roles, in particular, continues to be challenging. Where appointments have been possible, they have tended to be social workers who are more recently qualified.

An immediate response in many local authorities is to make use of agency staff in an attempt to ensure people's needs are met and they are safeguarded. However, we found persistent change of workers had a negative impact on engagement and building trust with people, especially children and young people. Moreover, the negative impact of this on budgets is profound and the pool of appropriately qualified experienced agency staff is rapidly diminishing.

All of the local authorities affected were committed to reducing dependency on agency staff. One positive long-term response to addressing these difficulties, taken by an increasing number of local authorities, is the adoption of a 'grow your own' approach by supporting existing staff through university to qualify as social workers.

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?*

Social services remained accessible throughout the pandemic.

Front door, information advice and assistance (IAA) and single point of access (SPOC) services operated effectively during the pandemic. We found services responsive to people's needs for help, support and safeguarding. In the best areas, established multi-agency arrangements were sustained, which incorporated timely and efficient referral systems that supported prioritisation.

> **"In the beginning it was difficult to make contact. But over the year it has become easier. So really I would have given a rating of not easy a year ago and now it is very easy".**
>
> Service user in Vale of Glamorgan

KEY FINDING

Prevention and early help approaches embedding

We found prevention and early help approaches were becoming embedded into practice. We noted in some local authorities the prevention element of service delivery had a reduced impact during the pandemic. However, in most cases we saw a continued drive for transformation demonstrated by a corporate focus on prevention as a means of meeting the needs of communities and ensuring services become sustainable. This was evidenced by senior leaders and elected members interviewed, who conveyed a good understanding of the benefits of adopting a preventative approach, a rationale for strategic direction, and ambition backed up by supportive strategic documentation.

In a small number of local authorities, more work is required to ensure seamless and co-ordinated services that prevent escalation of need and secure the best outcomes for people. It is, however, pleasing to note an emerging integrated approach to early help, creating a preventative culture through joint partnership working, reflective shared learning, and aligned delivery systems.

Generally we found 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 people's journey through the health and social care system.

Ensuring a multi-agency approach to prevention was also evidenced by early help panels which provide good examples of social services and partners from statutory and third sectors striving to ensure the right help is available at the right time.

Practice

- In Monmouthshire, the Community Development and Partnership Team screened people on the adult social services database before contacting them to find out whether they required 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 3,000 people were contacted over a two to three week period. The team utilised volunteer groups to provide support.
- Similar to other areas, in Flintshire, we saw targeted support for adults 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 also heard how the solution focused approach in mental health prevented people from going on to need more intensive services.

Prevention

Learning

Third sector provision has proven beneficial and effective in providing support

In Newport, we saw an early intervention model through which children can access a range of services supported by the Space Well-being Panel which comprised a wide range of statutory and third sector organisations.

Effective collaboration between local authorities within regions with relevant health boards and voluntary organisations provides significant benefit

'Bwthyn y Ddol', a joint project currently being developed between Conwy County Borough Council, Denbighshire County Council and Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board will, upon completion, be an accommodation service used to assess the complex needs of children, their families and carers. Children will benefit from this service being local and their needs being assessed in one location by multi-disciplinary professionals, reducing the need for multiple appointments in separate locations. Similarly, the Pembrokeshire Community Hub (the Hub) was set up swiftly at the outset of the pandemic as a 'one-stop shop'. The Hub helped co-ordinate volunteer work in the community to support those people in need of help, from shopping to a friendly telephone call. This was set up as a partnership between Pembrokeshire County Council, Pembrokeshire Association of Voluntary Services (PAVS), Hywel Dda University Health Board, and Delta Well-being. Pre-existing relationships and established networks across the health, social care and third sector enabled the Hub to link with 100 new COVID related networks and organisations established in response to the pandemic. At its peak, the Hub received several hundred calls per day, demonstrating the success of organisations coming together to connect with communities.

Innovative community projects enhanced people's quality of life during the pandemic

Gwynedd County Council delivered a Christmas box to everyone over the age of 70 in one village. A pen-pal scheme was also developed to connect children with older people benefitting both generations. We also heard about food banks being open to everyone in need without a criteria, and examples of many online activities to connect people through shared interests such as an online carer's festival.

People were supported to regain/retain independence sustained throughout the pandemic.

Aligned to strength-based approaches, practice in early help and prevention arrangements supported people to develop their own abilities, coping mechanisms and strengths.

Prevention

We saw many examples throughout Wales of effective multi-agency partnership working to support people to retain/regain independence including enhanced use of technology to support people's safety as well as reducing loneliness and isolation.

Practice

- In Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire and Ceredigion, the Connect project provides an enhanced lifeline and telecare service. Bespoke individualised equipment was provided to support people's well-being, with plans monitored through proactive calls and a 24/7 welfare response focusing on community based solutions. This enables people to be supported at home and whenever possible, avoiding the need for admission to hospital or residential care.
- The Virtual Autism Advice and Online Service is a collaboration between Monmouthshire County Council and Aneurin Bevan University Health Board, which provides advice and support for parents/carers to help manage challenging behaviours such as sleep problems behaviours. The service is accessible and timely as parents and carers are able to self-refer without having to rely on professional to make a referral on their behalf.
- In Merthyr, a General Practitioner Support Officer Service provides a conduit between primary care and social care, as people attend their doctor's surgery they can be supported with problems such as anxiety, providing an early opportunity to prevent needs escalating.

Working with partners also had a positive impact on intelligence gathering, information sharing, and risk based decision-making.

We also saw examples of agencies working together to alleviate pressures on hospital services, striving to promote independence and support people who require care and support to access relevant and appropriate rehabilitative opportunities. In some areas community responders, including volunteers, have supported people to remain at home rather than be admitted to hospital. In many others a 'discharge to assess model' was developed to support people to settle at home following a hospital admission.

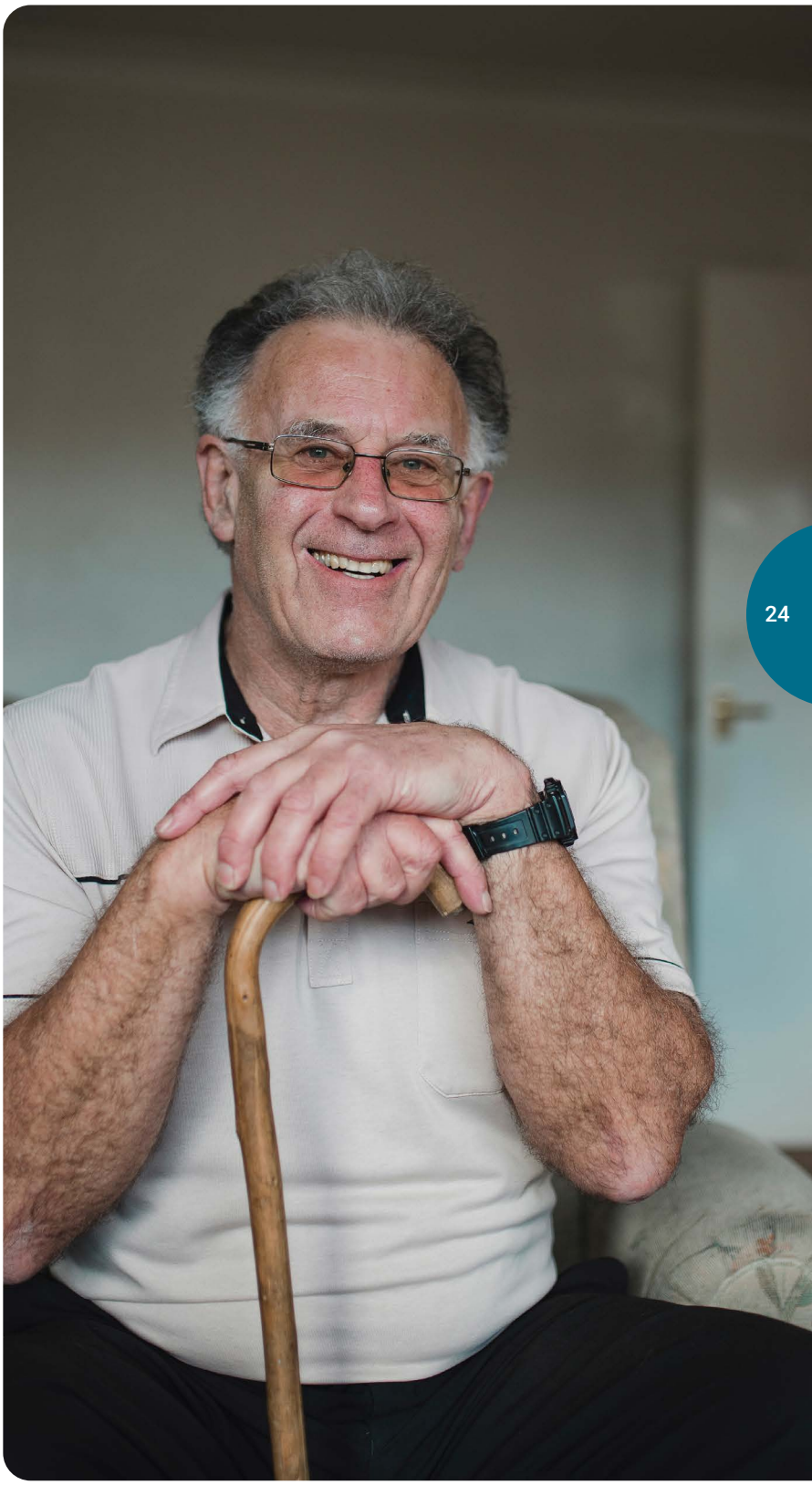
We saw evidence of learning from previous complaints supporting practice improvement as well as evidence of resources being flexed and targeted to the areas of most need. For example, we saw a range of support resources available such as online parenting groups and virtual youth clubs, as well as placement stability support to improve emotional well-being for children and families. Some local authorities had invested in specific teams to provide intensive support to those with the most complex and pressing need for therapeutic support.

Prevention

Other local authorities had used outreach support, either digitally or face-to-face, to provide support to isolated adults living independently including provision of activity packs and engagement in outdoor activities such as picnics and walks.

Practice

- In Torfaen, we heard how a walk alongside someone helped to elicit their feelings about a safeguarding matter thus ensuring that their voice was still obtained despite the restrictions of the pandemic.
- In Gwynedd, we heard how the COVID Support Team was a point of contact for people to support and alleviate the pressure on statutory services.



Prevention

KEY FINDING

Not all carers were sufficiently well supported

Local authorities have a duty to offer assessments to a carer where it appears that the carer has support needs. Many of the services carers rely on understandably stopped operating during the pandemic. Although we found examples of carers being offered support during the pandemic, we were told by some they felt abandoned and the impact on them had been severe leading to the breakdown of care arrangements.

More positively, we heard some local authorities had worked with local carers organisations to put in place innovative arrangements to promote engagement.

Practice

- Rhondda Cynon Taf had updated carer resources, for example, digital resources and engagement with carers' network and as a result they had identified carers requiring additional support. This resulted in an increase of approximately 30% more carer's assessments completed than in the same period the previous year.
- In Gwynedd, we heard from carers in adults services about excellent support from the local authority, with the innovative delivery of craft boxes followed by a virtual craft activity undertaken together with other carers to reduce isolation.

Documents viewed and practitioners and carers spoken to confirm carers' assessments were not routinely offered or completed in line within statutory duties. When assessments had been completed processes for communicating outcomes to carers required improvement. Samples of assessments evidenced that practice needs to improve to ensure carers' outcomes and eligibility are clearly recorded, along with reference to whether carers are able and willing to provide care. There was evidence that practitioners would benefit from further training in relation to identifying eligibility and undertaking assessments for carers. Local authorities need to ensure carers are routinely informed of their rights to an assessment and this is understood and promoted by all staff. Carers' assessments when applied consistently will ensure that opportunities for supporting carers and promoting their well-being will be more effectively identified.

Prevention

KEY FINDING

Capacity of services insufficient to keep pace with demand

Whilst the degree varied across Welsh local authorities and between types of services, most areas reported increasing pressure on services as the pandemic progressed. During our assuance checks we saw an increasing lack of capacity within adult domiciliary support services/reablement services, as well as, early help provision and placement services for children. Already under pressure pre-pandemic, the challenges bought about by COVID-19 have undoubtedly increased pressure on the capacity of services to provide people with choices about the type/volume of care and support needed to promote independence and safety.

We saw waiting lists for domiciliary support services. Practitioners and managers we spoke with expressed concerns about this. People's care and support needs were at times unmet with increased pressures on unpaid carers. Many carers also reported limitations on services due to COVID-19 restrictions had brought them to "breaking point". In some local authorities, people's discharge from hospital was delayed because readily available packages of care were insufficient. Positively, we did see flexible and swift responses where there was an immediate risk to a person's safety. The 'discharge to assess' practice implemented in some local authorities also facilitated the prompt discharge for some people, in line with their wishes.

In many areas we found people also waiting for services, such as occupational therapy and other therapeutic services. Whilst most waiting lists were well managed with the aim of limiting deterioration, we found many people losing physical or mental capability while waiting for services to begin. Some local authorities were able to take a pro-active response to these challenges.

Provision of seven-day hub provides timely response to requests for information, advice and assistance

Learning

In Blaenau Gwent, we found how learning from the development of a seven-day hub service for both acute and community hospitals, plus community referrals in response to the pandemic, has improved areas of practice. Such as, case management and administrative processes, enhanced performance data, and streamlined assessment forms to better support practice.

As restrictions are now lifting and some previously paused services are re-opening, many local authorities are experiencing an unprecedented demand for people requiring care in their own home. This has been compounded by some providers 'handing back' packages of care with a knock-on effect as other services such as community resource and reablement teams having had to re-align their service to fill this gap. Local authorities report provision in terms of both domiciliary support services and reablement services are operating at full capacity. We found requests for services being risk rated by local authorities and those in most urgent need being prioritised, both for people in the community or in hospital. Growth of in-house provision remains a priority for some local authorities and more innovative solutions were being planned with the development of community catalysts and micro-enterprises. The majority of local authorities in Wales have cited recruitment and retention of the domiciliary care workforce, both in-house and the independent sector, as the primary cause of this issue and this is a key area of focus for them, looking ahead.

Partnerships 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?*

We generally found good governance arrangements and corporate support for social services. This enables leaders to maintain a firm focus on what is needed to deliver social care by working within directorates and across directorates in local authorities.

KEY FINDING

Collaborative partnership working across sectors was sustained during pandemic

During the pandemic we found an increased commitment to collaborative working between local authorities and partners. This worked best where operational relationships were already well-established and was strengthened and enhanced through virtual working practices. The increased use of digital platforms meant agencies could often contribute more effectively in statutory meetings. Partners shared intelligence to identify and monitor the most people in needs of protection.

> "Staff in the local authority were amazing the whole of last year, never seen collaborative working like that before".
>
> Partner from Bridgend

> "Joint working is a real strength".
>
> Provider in Bridgend

> "First meet was with contracts manager who was amazing... Two new people in post and they are amazing, very supportive"
>
> Provider in Swansea

> "We had our first staff positive in November, and the support was outstanding. Local authority staff were very supportive as we waited for the result and once we had the result were fantastic and so prompt in responding and helping us with the contingency plans and arranging the inspection control nurse to visit. The offer was made that if we needed additional staffing we were to contact the authority to provide help. As a small care home and not part of any chain you do feel really alone. But local authority staff always seemed to be there for you no matter how small the query, and I think what often made the world of difference was that they asked you how you were, obviously they would gather all the information that was required but they would always check on how you were coping. I think this pandemic has shown that even though we are one care home we have a much larger team around us supporting us. I would send emails over the weekend thinking that it would be there ready for a Monday morning, but I would get a response straight away. The pandemic has definitely made commissioners relationship with providers much stronger"
>
> Provider in Blaenau Gwent

Partnerships and Integration

Schools and education staff worked closely with social workers to identify and make appropriate "hub" provision for children. We also saw how support commissioned by education made a positive difference to children's outcomes. Although in children's services we heard how relationships with the judiciary continued to be challenging, in response some local authorities developed multi-agency forums to reduce delays in legal processes.

Practice

Work is underway in Monmouthshire to maximise the place-based opportunities of working across social services, third sector, and primary and community health services with the aim of achieving a fully integrated approach based on working with communities and for the people in those communities.

In practice we found multi-agency forums for risk management with practitioners working together to share information.

Practice

In Blaenau Gwent, we saw practitioners from different sectors and services working effectively together with home care staff deployed to community hospitals, working alongside health staff to ensure safe and timely discharges of people.

We generally found positive improvements in working relationships between health and social care at points of crisis during the pandemic. Previous barriers to integration including challenging budgets, increasing demand and competing priorities were set aside as both focused on meeting the immediate needs of the population. We saw examples of staff moving between organisations where this was required.

Practice

- We heard how departments within Flintshire 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.
- In Torfaen, the development of Community Connectors who work in the community to reduce social isolation has continued to grow, with new staff being employed using additional financial support from Aneurin Bevan University Health Board supporting the expansion of the service.

Partnerships and Integration

In some local authorities partners could have worked better together at a strategic level to deliver a more integrated and sustainable approach to promoting independence and well-being.

This was most notable in relation to hospital discharge and in mental health services. Other inhibiting factors to effective partnership working included some staff working from home whilst those in other agencies remained office-based, and the fact that different agencies did not use the same virtual communication platforms.

Collaborative partnership working supported people

We saw many positive and encouraging examples of collaboration and partnership working between local authorities and partners to support people's well-being. A major strength across Wales was the effort of volunteers and community support groups to help people during the pandemic.

Partners shared a joint understanding of the need to prioritise peoples' safety. More than ever effective communication was necessary and led to innovative practices such as the development of a regional escalation policies for care homes to target help. The challenge is now to continue these established relationships and the culture of collaboration post pandemic.

Practice:

- On the Isle of Anglesey, a long-standing partnership working with the voluntary sector (Medrwn Môn) and community groups provided a platform from which the community response to the challenges resulting from the pandemic could be built.
- Across the Isle of Anglesey and Gwynedd, we saw 37 area support teams set up, with over 850 volunteers who assisted people with tasks such as shopping and prescription collection. This partnership working extended into establishing guidance for safe transport of medication alongside colleagues from the local health board.
- Gwynedd utilised volunteers to support people with tasks such as dog walking and food collection.
- In Rhondda Cynon Taff, 120 staff members were re-deployed to make contact with those people on the shielded list to check on their well-being and ascertain whether they required support.
- Bridgend opened a well-being mental health retreat in December 2020; the service is delivered as part of a collaboration between the local authority, Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board, South Wales Police and other third sector service providers.
- Powys County Council, in partnership with the third sector, continues to develop domiciliary care provision within rural areas with a rising number of micro-enterprises being developed. This service allows people to be supported within their own homes reducing the need for entering residential care.
- The Caerphilly safeguarding hub went live in January 2021 and we found this was already having a positive impact on intelligence gathering, information sharing, and risk based decision-making. Plans are now in place to enhance the safeguarding hub response to missing children and those at risk of exploitation.

Partnerships and Integration

KEY FINDING

Local authorities are supportive commissioners

We heard about increased communication, engagement and support between local authority commissioners and all providers of services. There was certainly a spirit of 'all hands to the pump' to ensure support was maintained within the COVID-19 restrictions. Accurate intelligence sharing was crucial during the pandemic and we saw innovative ways of this being done between providers and the local authority.

Practice

We heard in Bridgend about a two-way information portal where providers have access to regular updated information, peer support, best practice examples and any learning by examples.

Across all local authorities we visited we heard again and again from providers about the valuable support they had received from local authorities.

> **"Social services has been outstanding in facilitating what we needed...there is always someone we can turn to".**

Provider from the Vale of Glamorgan

The relationship between commissioners and providers shifted to a more mutual and supportive working relationship. We heard positive stories of the support provided by third sector organisations, and of local authorities' willingness to experiment and innovate with them to meet the needs of the population.

> **"There was a culture of working collaboratively and making decisions together".**

Provider from Bridgend

KEY FINDING

Digital Platforms do not support practice

All local authorities reported difficulties using the Welsh Community Care Information System (WCCIS) system. We repeatedly heard about routine issues with accessing and uploading information. These problems are particularly acute if a new local authority is added or the system is being updated. Staff told us how they had lost information or been unable to access the system, often having to download work outside working hours to ensure people's information was recorded and available.

These issues were described by staff as demoralising and concerning as current information about people was not always up to date. Senior managers are aware of these issues and are continually taking appropriate action to try to resolve the problem.

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?*

KEY FINDING

People were supported, their well-being promoted and independence maintained

We found many good examples of local authorities supporting people to maintain and promote their well-being. We found people were often active participants in designing their own care and support packages. Documents viewed, and discussions held with people, evidenced what mattered had been the focus of contact from practitioners. Consideration had been given to barriers that people faced balanced with their strengths and existing support available to them. Conversations focused on the outcomes that people wanted to achieve, with them being active participants in discussions.

Practice

- A person from Monmouthshire told us he had benefitted from care and support in terms of practical assistance through the provision of aids and adaptations, assistance with personal care and residential reablement whilst work was ongoing at his property. Positively, he felt able to contribute to decisions made, felt listened to and part of the decision-making process.
- In Ceredigion, assessments for low level equipment continued over Zoom which contributed to ensuring people's safety and independence.

We saw positive examples of care and support being tailored to meet peoples' identified outcomes, replacing traditional needs-based planning and subsequent provision of generic services.

Practice

Flintshire responed postively to a person who requested an increase in her attendance at "day work" once restrictions eased.

We also saw examples of good contingency planning, prioritisation and innovation in service provision, including projects addressing issues raised within population needs assessments and area plans. In a few examples, care plans lacked a focus on what was needed for people to achieve what they wanted; this meant care and support planning could misrepresent what is important to people. Some care plans would benefit from more effectively ensuring people's strengths are consistently reflected in a meaningful way and that they contain greater clarity and detail.

Well-being

Practice

In Blaenau Gwent, a seven day week contract aimed at managing risk to successfully maintain children at home and support adults to remain within the community was arranged. Services worked well together with 'Flying Start' support workers redeployed to support with home care duties, and to maintain services to those in need of care and support within the community.

Integrated Care Funding can used effectively to provide innovative and bespoke support services

In Gwynedd, the specialist Emerald team was set up using Integrated Care Fund to prevent abuse and/or minimise its effect. The focus was on assessing and intervening to appropriately support both victims and perpetrators of sexually harmful behaviour (SHB). The team aims to reduce the number of SHB cases referred to statutory services following an incident of abuse. This is achieved through ensuring a range of professionals within both statutory and early intervention services are suitably skilled with knowledge and an understanding of problematic sexual behaviour and SHB in order to provide timely and appropriate interventions. This project will be evaluated with input from Bangor University with a view to inform future decision-making.

Learning

KEY FINDING

Safeguarding statutory duties sustained during pandemic

We saw good evidence of safeguarding practices in children and adult services across Wales in line with statutory requirements. With appropriate practitioners and representatives of relevant partner agencies attending meetings the increased use of digital platforms facilitating agencies more frequent contribution to safeguarding strategy discussions and reviews. In most local authorities, evidence from reviews of safeguarding cases demonstrates good analysis of risk, recording of key decisions, and robust management oversight.

Pod meetings in children's services can clearly promote a holistic and strengths-based approach to working with families

In Carmarthenshire, records clearly articulated outcome focused planning. Plans outlined clear achievable goals to safeguard children and improve their well-being through the provision of a range of services best suited to their needs. We reviewed a plan that included stringent risk measures to ensure a child's safety over the pandemic period. This comprised daily unannounced visits which focused on risk whilst also evidencing the quality of a positive working relationship between family and practitioner.

Learning

Well-being

However, we found managerial oversight and quality assurance processes need to be strengthened in relation to safeguarding practices in many areas. Improvement is required to ensure consistent practice in relation to timeliness of enquiries and investigations, improved analysis of risk and decision-making, and to ensure people's voices are more effectively heard and their views consistently referenced. In a small number of local authorities, we saw delays in some safeguarding procedures. In a minority of cases, children who should have been seen during an enquiry were not thus limiting their opportunity to make their feelings known.

Quality of mental capacity assessments

From the very small sample of mental capacity assessments we reviewed these indicated there were processes in place to ensure people's mental capacity was assessed when needed throughout the pandemic. Practitioners appropriately consider people's mental capacity to engage in safeguarding enquiries, their assessments and care and support planning. We saw practitioners respecting the right of individuals to make what others may consider unwise decisions. Also some good examples of mental capacity assessments and use of Independent Mental Capacity Advocates (IMCA), where required.

Practice

- In Anglesey, we saw a growing expertise in the area of mental capacity. Work seen was of a very high standard and provided confidence that adults who lack mental capacity can be safeguarded from unnecessary restraint on their liberties.
- In the Vale of Glamorgan, an adult with a cognitive impairment had been provided with significant support from a social worker to promote the person's right to make their own decisions. It was clear the social worker had applied their professional knowledge with a clear focus on ensuring the rights of the person.

However, we found some opportunities were missed to effectively include people's voices. A number of cases reviewed could have benefitted from more accurately capturing the rationale when people are deemed to lack mental capacity.

KEY FINDING

Poor record keeping undermines practice

It is acknowledged local authorities' primary focus during the pandemic has been on the provision of support. However we found evidence of poor record keeping prior to the onset of the additional challenges arising from staffing pressures associated with COVID-19. In the majority of local authorities, case records reviewed did not reflect the positive practice being undertaken; in particular, some of the imaginative direct work undertaken with people was absent from the records and variable in quality. Whilst most records adequately captured people's views and identified personal outcomes, many others were overly focused on need rather than strengths. We found decisions were often recorded without an explanation or clear rationale. Many assessments we saw lacked analysis and did not adequately capture the impact on people experiences. Lack of available up-to-date recorded information in order to make timely, appropriate and proportionate decisions, presents risks which could potentially impact on people's safety and well-being.

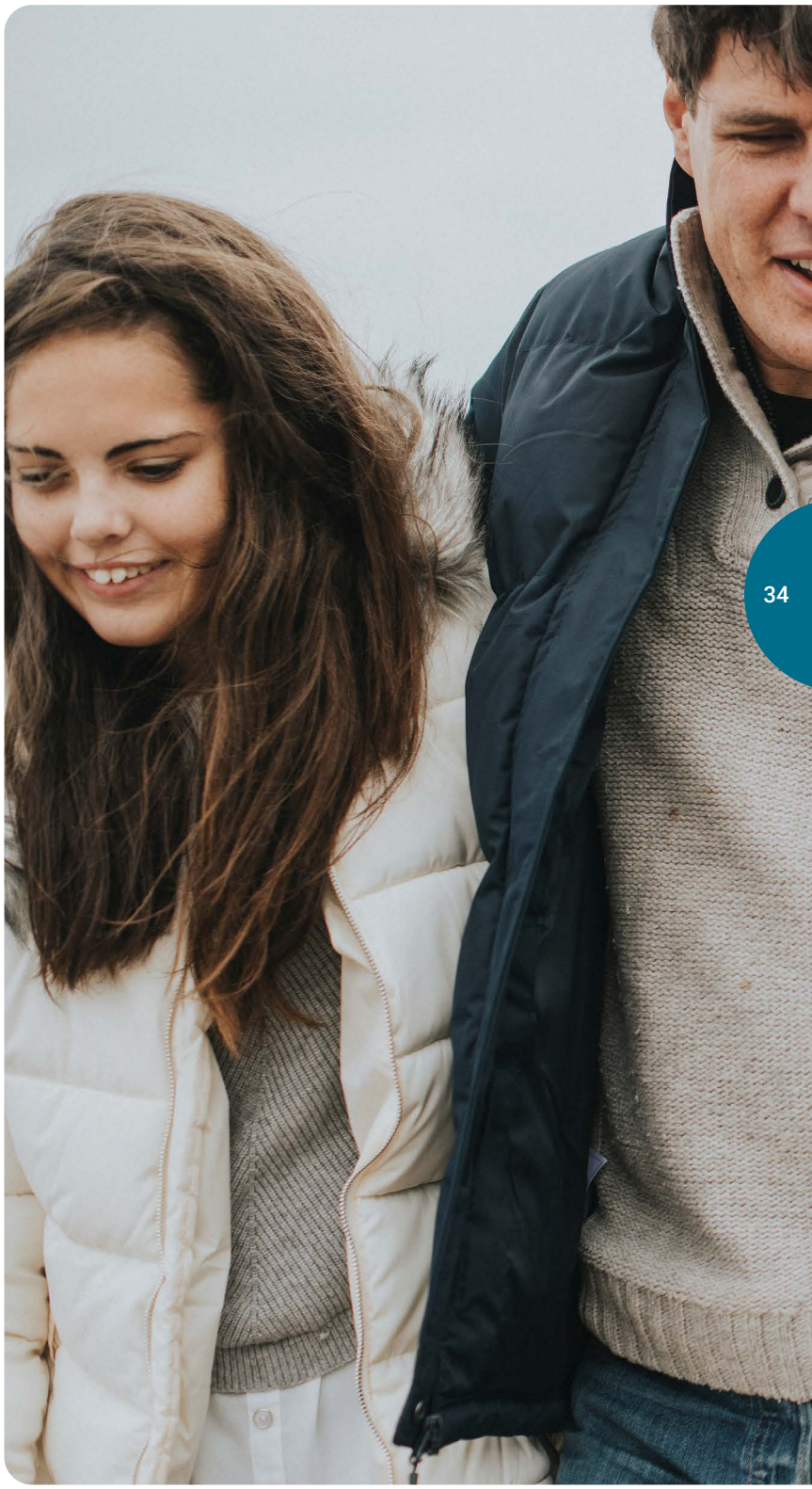
Well-being

KEY FINDING

Quality and timeliness of assessments and reviews

We found the quality of care and support assessments and plans in children and adult services could be improved in many areas. Assessments and plans could benefit from more clearly detailing what actions are required in order to ensure people's outcomes are met and measurable.

In some services, we found delays in completion of assessments and reviews with the impact of delaying and/or compromising the provision of care and support. We were informed this was due to a number of factors including increased demand and absence/vacancies in some teams. There was evidence this was mitigated within some local authorities by managers regularly monitoring, risk assessing and prioritising people waiting for an assessment/review. Similarly, in other local authorities, practitioners maintained contact with people and amended their method of review as necessary. Improvements must be made in relation to the timeliness of reviews of care and support plans to be confident that people are getting the support they need in a timely manner.



KEY FINDINGS

Children looked after

CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER

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?

People VOICE AND CONTROL

KEY FINDING

Children's voices are heard

For children who were in care we saw statutory visits and reviews undertaken in a timely manner thus ensuring that children are safe and their needs are appropriately met. We saw examples of children being included and involved in their plans, and some local authorities were actively encouraging children and young people to chair their own reviews with the necessary support if required.

We found many older children and teenagers felt more able to attend and participate in care reviews and meetings undertaken virtually. They told us they found the security of their own homes less threatening than the formal meetings held at school or in an office setting. We found it more complex for younger children but with support from parents and carers some became used to this way of engagement. The provision of technical equipment also benefitted children's educational needs. Similarly, children have benefitted from being able to express their views and feelings through technology in a timely manner.

Learning

The promotion of technology to obtain the direct voice and choice of children and young people has been successful

Conwy and Denbighshire have developed the Mind of My Own App which is an on line participation tool to engage with, and hear children's voices. It also enables children to share information for their statutory reviews and contact their social worker if they need support.

People VOICE AND CONTROL

During the COVID-19 restrictions young people placed with foster carers and care leavers spoke of the difficulty in undertaking physical visits with parents and family. Many were able to undertake contact via digital platforms but felt it was not the same as being with their family face-to-face.

Parents also engaged via digital platforms. Managers told us a positive outcome has been some parents have found engaging via digital platforms easier and less threatening for case conferences and reviews. The necessary equipment was supplied by some local authorities to ensure contact was maintained. Parents and foster carers supported younger children to communicate using a variety of digital platforms.

Learning

Technology proved to be an effective tool in supporting parents to inform their children about the associated risks of using the internet, of significant importance given the increased use by children often in isolation

Conwy designed an internet safety page focusing on supporting parents about risks and safety for children using the internet. This is an important piece of work given increasing concern about this during the pandemic.

Independent Safeguarding Reviewing Officers maintained good contact with children throughout the pandemic

Independent Safeguarding Reviewing Officers (ISRO) play a key role in ensuring statutory targets are met, cases do not drift and the child's voice is heard. We saw escalation policies and processes in place to ensure cases are referred to the highest levels of senior management to resolve any issues at the earliest opportunity. Positively, in most local authorities IRSO did not need to invoke the formal escalation process. Due to good communication and open and honest relationships with teams, they were able to raise and address concerns promptly without having to escalate matters.

Although we saw inconsistent practices across Wales in relation to how, and how frequently, ISRO maintained contact with and sought the opinions of children looked after, we also saw evidence of good practice. We saw evidence in some local authorities of IRSO contacting children prior to reviews and it is positive that in some areas midpoint reviews to assess progress in relation to children's care and support plans are undertaken.

Learning

Effectively involving children and young people in reviews helps increase their participation

In common with other local authorities in Flintshire, Ceredigion and Conwy, minutes of children looked after reviews were written directly to the child in very creative ways, acknowledging the child's wishes, and explaining in child-friendly language the outcomes and decisions of their review.

People VOICE AND CONTROL

Variable support for care leavers

Care leavers spoke highly of the positive impact personal assistants have had in their lives and how they have been supported to gain new skills to live independently, to access jobs and education.

It was heartening to talk to care leavers, whom despite having many difficult years in their young lives were pursuing careers in nursing and midwifery, social work, youth work, paramedics and many were applying to go to university. However, some care leavers told us how finding appropriate accommodation in safe settings is sometimes a challenge and choices are limited in many local authority areas. Not all local authorities prioritised care leavers for access to the housing register sufficiently. Many care leavers told us they struggled with isolation during COVID-19 as they were living alone and out of touch with family and friends. This resulted in anxiety and for some a re-emergence of mental health issues.

> "My PA has been great she is always there has supported me to get my flat and to get into university".
>
> Care leaver

> **"I had around 5 different Social Workers. I'd settle and gain trust - and then they would leave. That was tough".**
>
> Care leaver

KEY FINDING

Advocacy for children looked after could be strengthened

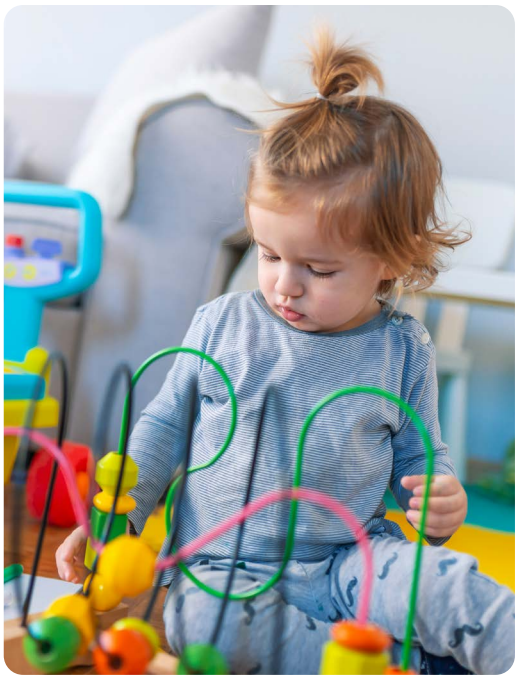
In most cases we reviewed, advocacy was offered to children looked after. However, the offer could be strengthened to increase take-up from many children who did not fully appreciate the significance of the help being offered. We rarely saw repetition of the offer made as children progressed through their care journey thus limiting opportunities for children to reconsider as they mature and/or gain more experience or insight into their status as a child looked after. Similarly, we saw little evidence of parents, many of whom may require additional support and information being offered advocacy support. Where advocacy is offered there should be a more robust recoding process to evidence it has been received.

Prevention

KEY FINDING

Reducing the numbers of children looked after is a high priority for local authorities across Wales

Reducing the numbers of children looked after enabling their return home to parents, or discharging care orders, is a high priority for all social services in Wales. A number of formal systems exist for example early help panels, complex placements panels and permanency monitoring groups, to monitor all children looked after and take necessary measures to ensure actions are implemented to achieve the best outcomes for children.



The best outcomes were seen where children had stable placements meeting their needs and supporting their long-term goals. Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) are vital in supporting placements as an alternative to returning children into the care system. Those local authorities that have developed SGO teams and posts have been successful in increasing the number of safe revocation of care orders into SGO with better outcomes achieved for the child.

Local authorities have been proactive in promoting a positive approach to keep children and young people close to home where possible. This has sometimes resulted in the reduction of children going into care by remaining with, or being placed with parents or in kinship placements with other family members. In most cases we reviewed, we found risk well managed and parents supported to provide a stable environment. Some local authorities have invested funds in specialist social work 'placement with parent' roles and are reviewing all cases to establish safe return to parents. Other local authorises have developed Strength in Families teams and intensive family support and some children have returned to live with their parents with support from these teams. Family therapy is also offered when required.

Learning

Innovative support for foster carers provides timely and appropriate support reducing the risk of potential placement breakdown

Flintshire has developed the Mockingbird fostering model where one foster home acts as a hub for other foster carers offering planned and emergency sleepovers as well as advice, training and support. The hub home foster carers provide support to around six to ten other foster carers in their community. The aim of the programme is to improve placement stability for the child and the fostering family and help them build stronger relationships.

Prevention

Learning

Multi-disciplinary teams providing intensive support to children and families reduce the risk of children having to come into the care of the local authority

In many local authorities such as Merthyr, Anglesey, Conwy, Blaenau Gwent, Newport and Monmouthshire we heard about Multi-Systemic Therapy Teams, Strengthening Families Teams, Supportive Families Teams, Resilient Families Teams, Achieving Change Together and Integrated Family Support Services and Family Group Conference and Rapid Response services, all of which include professionals from varied backgrounds with different qualifications, working flexibly, often out of hours, to enable children at risk of coming in to care to remain with families without recourse to statutory services.

Where local authorities have developed services for babies and infants to support young parents, this is proving to be beneficial and is reaping rewards. The focus is on early intervention, working with parents at an early stage to understand the infant's needs, their responsibilities and developing coping strategies. The aim is to keep the family together to prevent babies coming into the care system.

Practice

In Bridgend, they have developed the Baby In Mind service which aims to support parents to positively care for their babies and infants, preventing them from entering the care system.

KEY FINDING

Preventative services developing

We found evidence of a range of preventative services developed in many local authorities using Welsh Government grant funding. In some areas 'edge of care' teams offer targeted and timely support to foster carers and families, to prevent placement breakdown.

We recognised the increasing complexity and numbers of children and young people who require support.

Learning

Innovative approaches required to respond to rapidly changing circumstances

During the pandemic, Swansea's level one youth offer was re-modelled from an indoor centre based support to an outreach street based approach to ensure continued supportive engagement with young people in their own spaces and places. Youth Hub Development Officers (YHDO) advocated for the needs of young people on the beach front, as they were worried that the strategy of dispersing young people when intoxicated was risky due to them moving towards the town centre where they were less visible and more at risk. These views were fed into a strategic multi-agency meeting where a plan was developed which considered the views of young people themselves and ensured they had a safe space to spend time. At a later date the YDHO were able to undertake harm reduction work with peer groups on the beach front, ensuring they were safe and had safe routes home, thereby reducing the risk of harm.

Prevention

We identified innovative service provision with many teams now including in-house psychological and therapy roles to support those children with the most complex behaviours with many local authorities moving at faster pace to develop trauma informed practice teams.

Foster carers told us how they appreciated the efforts made by local authorities to maintain good communication and placements support during the pandemic. We found family-led planning and foster carers access to their own psychological support services was promoted in many areas. This helped foster carers to more effectively support the children and young people they cared for. Many foster carers had to learn new home-schooling skills. Some were provided with additional laptops and tablets. They also felt more valued this year and they welcomed the art/craft packs, flowers, chocolates and Christmas presents they received as an acknowledgement of the good work they were doing.

Practice

In the Vale of Glamorgan, Enfys, a team of clinical psychologists, graduate mental health workers, and occupational therapists support practitioners and foster carers to understand the child and respond to them in a therapeutic way.

KEY FINDING

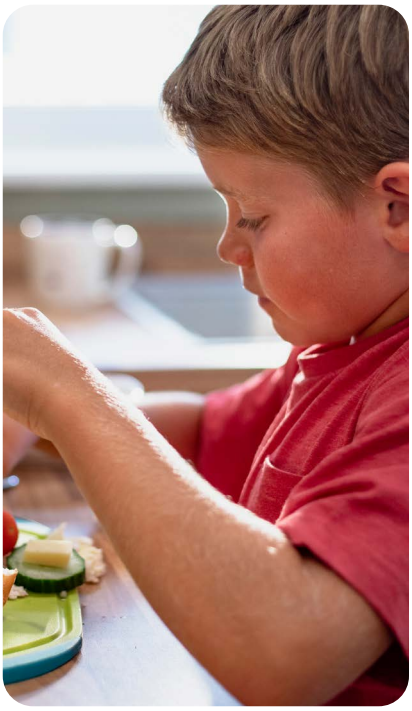
Placement insufficiency

Children are needing support at a much younger age due to the emotional and behavioural impact of abusive experiences. For instance, they may be involved in gangs or county lines, have substance misuse issues, or on the edges of child exploitation. It is therefore crucial that the right foster families are found, trained and supported to provide robust help to those children presenting with the most complex and challenging needs. Whilst complexity is not new, many local authorities are struggling to place children with these extremely complex needs. For those young people needing intensive levels of support we found local authorities are often unable to identify suitable placement options with skilled, trained and experienced foster carers. This is of prime concern and high priority for senior management teams, corporate parents and portfolio holders, as well as partner agencies.

Appropriate residential care provision is extremely difficult to access by a number of local authorities for those children and young people with the most complex emotional and behavioural needs. This type of service is needed for respite, assessment and treatment. Provision of this type of service may be more cost effective and sustainable if done on a regional footprint. Although a small number of local authorities are developing small group home facilities, which mirrors family life many children are still being sent out of Wales to access this and other therapeutic types of support.

A number of local authorities expressed serious concerns about the lack of available secure accommodation within both Wales and England. This deficit has led to the most complex, vulnerable young people being placed in inappropriate accommodation which does not adequately fulfil their therapeutic and/or care needs. Many young people have been placed in unregistered placements due to the lack of suitable and/or available registered placements. This sometimes results in a reduced opportunity for young people to achieve best outcomes.

> **"In one year I had 8 foster carer placements - all my possessions were in a black bin liner so I learnt early on there was no point in unpacking this".**
>
> Care leaver



Partnerships and Integration

KEY FINDING

Partners worked collaboratively throughout the pandemic

This year of COVID-19 has seen partnerships in general become stronger and more aligned. There has been a camaraderie between different areas of the local authority and social services, for example assisting colleagues in education to set up school hubs to support children and young people. A strategic corporate approach across and between portfolios was observed in all local authorities. Where services were commissioned by the third sector these continued to be delivered and communication and partnership working improved.

The particular roles in place to provide support to children in care such as Looked After Child Nurses and education leads have all worked well together, attended appropriate reviews and case conferences and are very committed to the children with whom they work.

> **"Staff in the local authority were amazing the whole of last year, never seen collaborative working like that before. We were all in it together".**

" Looked After Child Nurse

We found local authorities enhanced multi-agency relationships during the pandemic and appropriate challenge was encouraged. Local authorities invited and encouraged participation from all those required for statutory reviews and in some local authorities they succeeded in securing the regular attendance of child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) lead. Partners told us it was easier to attend virtual conferences and meetings as reduced travel time to and from different offices enabled this.

Links with police, health, domestic abuse groups, and specialist child exploitation professionals were well developed and embedded in practice. We saw timely and appropriate decisions regarding safeguarding and risk, particularly in Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH).

Many local authorities worked with community groups during the pandemic. Volunteers were used as partners to support the most in need in their communities and carried out call checks to young people, particularly those experiencing mental health challenges, supported families to go on trips and family days out and support siblings where necessary.

Partnerships working within local authorities between education, sports and leisure and social services was also evident and many provided activity weeks for children looked after to have fun and adventures during the summer holidays. Parents, foster and kinship carers told us this was a great support as many had been home-schooling. They took this opportunity to have a break themselves.

> **"When my foster child went on their summer camp weeks, it gave me and my partner the opportunity to go walking, have a picnic together or just do nothing - it was our saviour during a challenging year".**

" Anonymous

Partnerships and Integration

KEY FINDING

Insufficient mental health support for children

There remains a lack of mental health support for children in local authorities across Wales. We found misunderstanding and miscommunication about roles between CAMHS and the local authority; with CAMHS operating a clinical model, which some other professionals see as defensive and unhelpful. We heard thresholds for access to services are high, interventions short and of withdrawal of support at times where risk of harm is extremely high. On a positive note we saw encouraging examples where local authorities used funding streams to employ psychologists and behavioural therapists to support children and young people and some had successfully developed positive relationships with their local CAMHS lead who contributed to the necessary meetings.

Practice

In Rhondda Cynon Taff, the Integrated Wellbeing Pathway developed between children's services, education and inclusion services, and counselling providers ensured children in need of protection were supported throughout the pandemic. Similarly, in Flintshire, a representative of CAMHS is based in the Early help Hub, alongside representatives of other agencies is proving to benefit children and families.

Where local authorities have been able to secure CAMHS support for placement panels, this has proved to be very successful. However, this is the exception rather than the norm.

Well-being

KEY FINDING

Direct work with children was sustained during the pandemic

We saw a wide range of practice used by staff to keep in touch with children during the pandemic. These included walks in the park, picnics outdoors, games and fun online quizzes. Children who required intensive support were prioritised for contact and many were visited face-to-face where necessary and in line with COVID-19 restrictions. We found positive direct work with many children continued throughout the pandemic. Life story work is being resourced in many local authorities and online books being developed to ensure memories and key milestones for children are not missed. Foster carers stressed the importance of this work to ensure children transitioned well into healthy adulthood.

Recruitment of foster carers

We saw some good examples of local authorities continuing to recruit and approve foster carers to meet the needs of children looked after despite the challenges of the pandemic. Local authorities used creative and virtual platforms to encourage applications as well as targeted campaigns. Some local authorities provide incentives, for example, reduced council tax, access to free gym and swimming to maintain existing foster carers and to encourage new applications. Appropriate induction and training continue to be provided via online platforms and more regular contact was offered to all foster carers.

All local authorities worked hard to encourage a range of people to apply to be foster carers to reflect the diversity and communities they serve. We met with single foster carers, fosters carers from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, same sex foster carers and foster carers whose first language was Welsh. The impact of this being children were offered more choice. We found examples where young people whose first language was Welsh were matched with Welsh speaking foster carers. Where there are different ethnic diversities, young people were able to make a preference for carers who shared the same religion or culture as them. This was also true in rural areas where foster carers recruited from agricultural backgrounds could be matched with children from similar circumstances. Fostering managers and teams aim to match children and young people to the foster carer/family we often found the most difficult challenge for teams was ensuring foster carers were able to support the most complex of children whose behaviours could fluctuate frequently.

Practice

Rhondda Cynon Taff have developed a Care2Work scheme which engages young people in care and prepares them to access further education, employment and work. They offer CV writing sessions, interviewing practice and presentation skills, with excellent success rates.

Practice

Caerphilly continued to successfully recruit 13 foster carers, and a further 19 applications were in progress of being assessed. The fostering team have used a range of initiatives such as Facebook, radio, and television as a recruitment platform. Whilst virtual panels, training, and supervision arrangements had all helped to ensure there was no drift in securing appointments to this crucial service.

Well-being

Health assessments delayed during the pandemic

Due to the pandemic there was some delay in children looked after health assessments and Personal Education Plans (PEP).

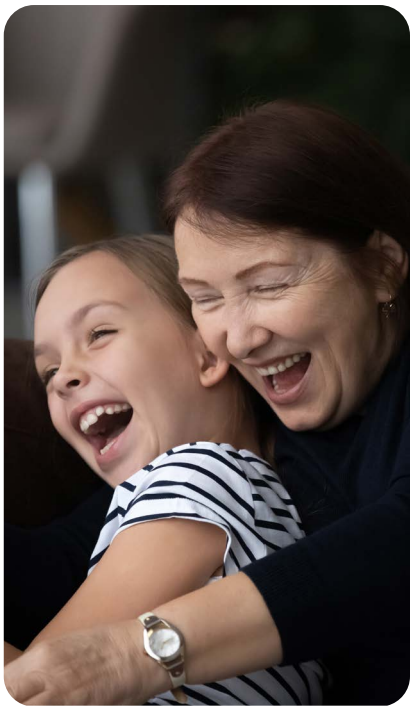
Many health staff were withdrawn from the community into secondary care to undertake COVID-19 duties. Therefore children looked after health assessments were not being followed up as rigorously as previously. A number of local authorities and health partners have quickly identified and recognised the specific needs of these young people and prioritised continuation of assessments in order to deliver the best care and support for these young people.

When schools closed PEP were on hold and there was some concern when schools reopened that PEP needed to be updated quickly. Local authorities have spoken of the support offered by their education partners in promoting access to education for all children and ensuring those children in most in need of protection were monitored.

Many local authorities told us of delays in foster carer medical assessments from General Practitioners. Access to General Practitioners was hard for managers to obtain the necessary medical assessments to progress foster carer applications. Had they not been able to do the medical self-assessments, agreed by the Welsh Government, the recruitment of new foster carers would have been held up and children disadvantaged. This has since improved.

More support required when adoptions break down

Resources and energy is in place to support children and young people to be adopted, however mangers told us that the aftercare and support can be limited when adoptions breakdown. This then creates a negative experience for children as they can be doubly traumatised. The National Adoption Service and local authorities need to look at improving the provision of service when approached by families with requests for support to prevent adoption break down.



APPENDIX 1

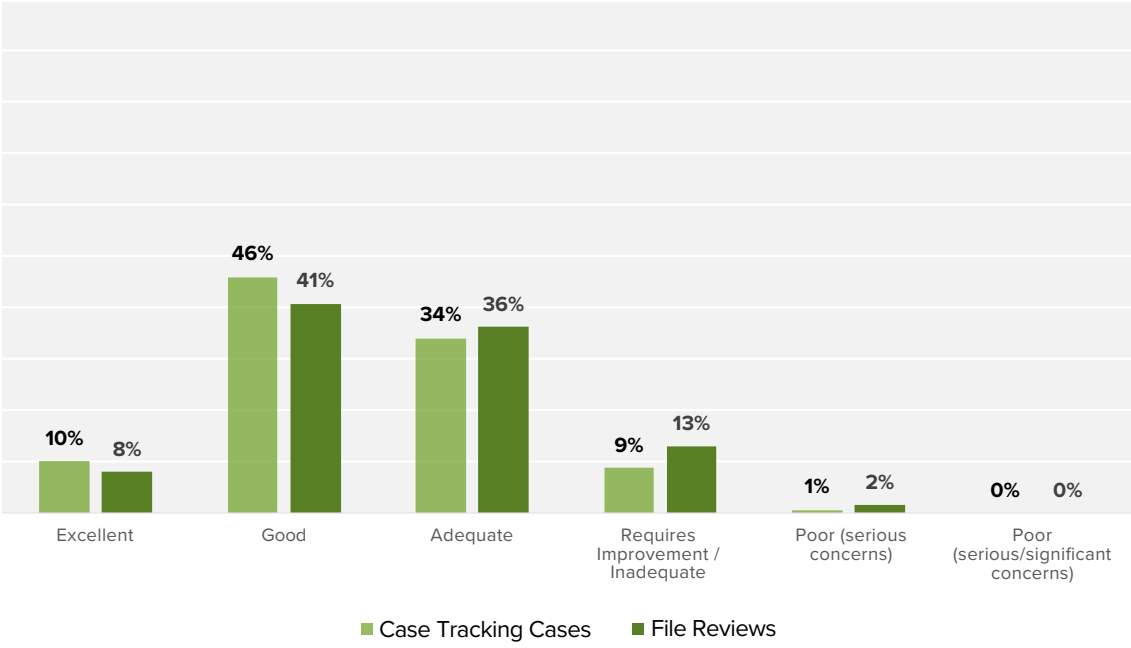
Methodology and Data

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

- Overall we tracked and reviewed up to 500 case files. Using our internal ratings framework the majority of cases were judged as 'Good' or 'Adequate'. A small number of cases were judged as excellent and a minority of cases were judged as 'Poor' and 'Inadequate' for services that required improvement (Figure 1).
- We inspected using the four principles of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 as our framework. The majority of ratings were judged for all principles was 'Good' or 'Adequate'. Up to 8% of our judgements were rated as 'requiring improvement' in all four principles (Figures 2-5).
- We completed 85 evaluation tools to record our evidence in line with the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014.
- We reviewed documentation supplied by the local authorities in advance of our visits.
- We spoke with 150 carers and people who were receiving or had received care and support, including care experienced young people.
- We held extensive interviews and focus groups with a range of professionals – including local authority staff, health and social care practitioners, service providers, managers, local authority heads of services, directors, elected members and partners, police and education representatives, and the third sector.
- We administered surveys to provide the opportunity for social services employees, parents and carers, people who had experienced care and support, providers and relevant partner agencies, to provide feedback about local authorities.

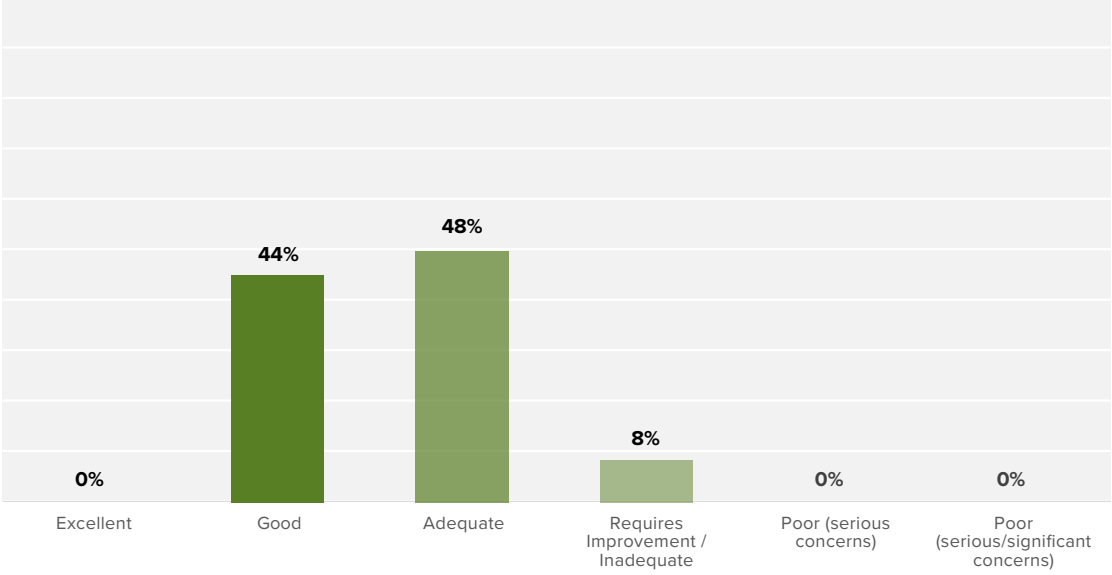
CIW internal ratings for all inspections

Fig. 1



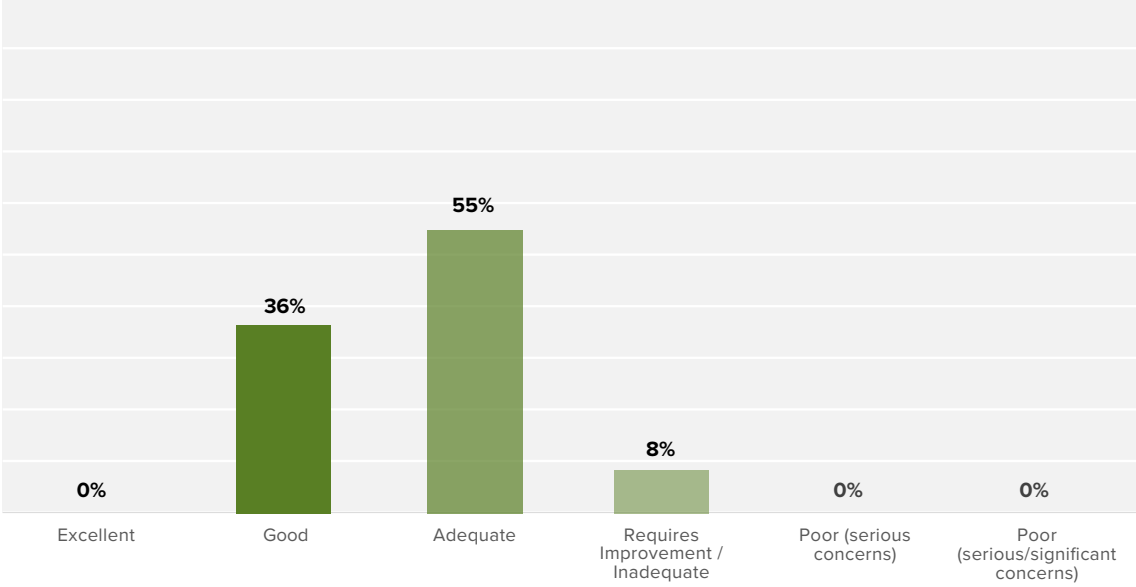
CIW internal ratings for the principle judgement - People

Fig. 2



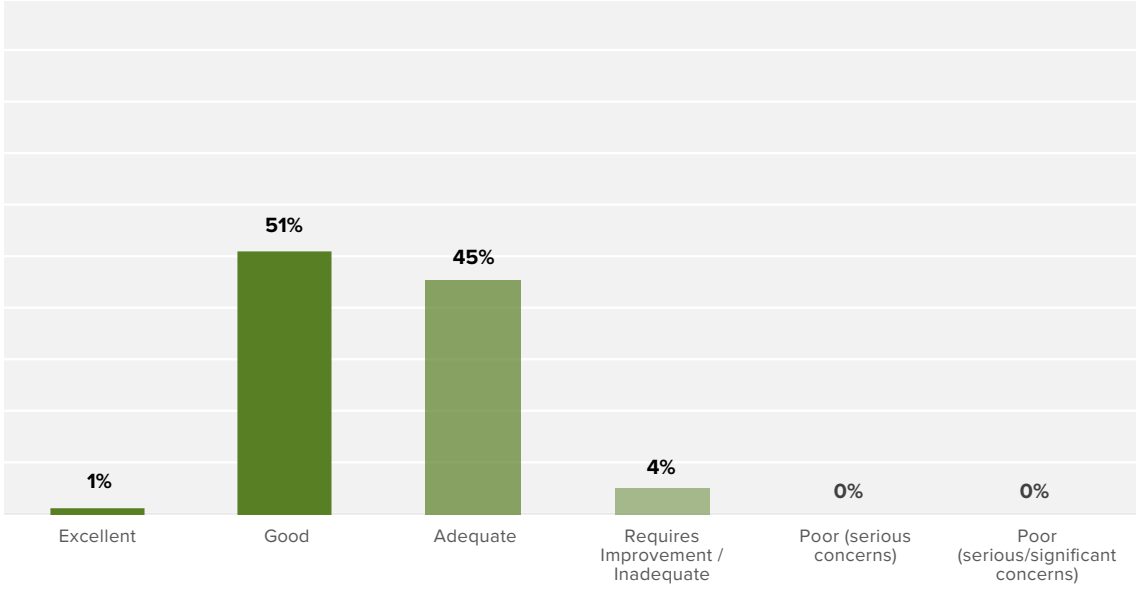
CIW internal ratings for the principle judgement - Prevention

Fig. 3



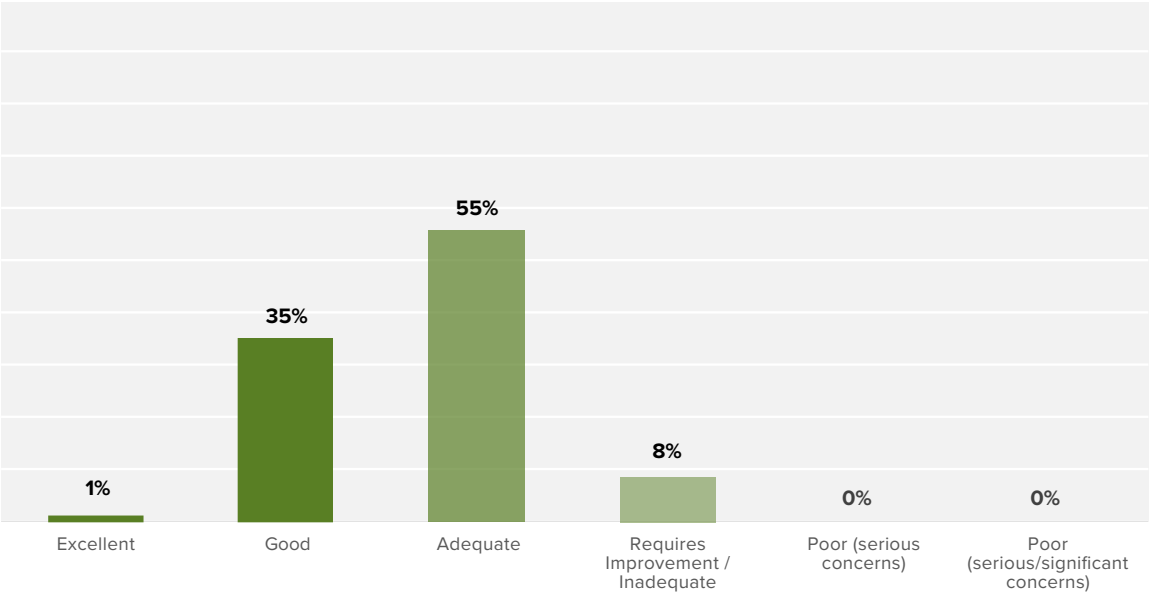
CIW internal ratings for the principle judgement – Partnerships and Integration

Fig. 4



CIW internal ratings for the principle judgement – Well-being

Fig. 5



APPENDIX 2

Performance Evaluation and Assurance Check letters

These letters summarise the findings of our national assurance check programme which took place between September 2020 and July 2021.

The purpose of the assurance checks was to review how well local authority social services continue to help adults, children and carers at this difficult time and their plans for sustainability of services into the future.

Our focus was on:

01. How well are local authorities discharging their statutory functions to keep people who need care and support and carers who need support, safe and promote their well-being during the pandemic.

02. How well local authorities prevent the need for children to come in to care; and are children returning home to their families quickly enough, where safe to do so.

Next steps

We expect the areas of improvement we have identified to be included in the local authorities' improvement plans. We will monitor progress through our ongoing performance evaluation activity with the local authorities.

To view all our findings and recommendations read the full letters here.

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Care Inspectorate
Wales

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