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Dear Director,

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

This letter summarises the findings of our assurance check on 21 to 24 June 2021. The purpose of this assurance check was to review how well local authority social services continue to help and support adults and children with a focus on safety and well-being.

Overview

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

Our focus was on:

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

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

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

Summary of findings and priorities for improvement:

People - voice and control - We asked: How well is the local authority ensuring people, carers and practitioners are having their voices heard, making informed choices, and maintaining control over their lives. While also balancing the recommendations and requirements made by Public Health Wales and Welsh Government to limit the spread of COVID-19?

The local authority has been proactive in its response to the challenges created by the pandemic. We were told how the Torfaen Support Hub was ready to deliver support to people who were shielding from the first day of lockdown including practical tasks such as dog walking and shopping.

Most people have voice and control over the care and support they receive with practice focused on what matters to the individuals, the outcome they want to achieve, and how they can use their own strengths and resources to promote their well-being. Within adult services people's voices are generally well represented in care planning. Within case files we saw people's personal outcomes recorded in their own words. We saw how people's own strengths and resilience were acknowledged and used flexibly to support people at home.

Systems were quickly put in place to support increased agile and remote working, where possible safe contact has been maintained with people throughout the pandemic. Where needed, direct safe face-to-face contact has continued, subject to a risk assessments and staff provided with appropriate levels of personal protective equipment (PPE). We saw examples of staff and providers working creatively as means of delivering their professional responsibilities such as the redeployment of day centre staff to areas of priority need across the local authority and commissioned services.

Effective work by senior management and staff, together with commitment and investment through transformation monies, has led to improved responses to the needs of children and families. Through introducing a strength based outcome focused model, staff and partners spoke of a growing confidence within children's services. We found within a number of cases children and families in need of help and protection received a service which is proportionate to their needs and enables them to effect positive change.

We identified the profile of carers within families was not always fully recognised by practitioners. In some of the case files we reviewed family members were not identified as carers and offered an assessment even when there was evidence of the pressures of the caring responsibilities on their wellbeing. The local authority must ensure all workers are

able to identify carers and make the offer of a carer assessment as is outlined in Code of Practice for Part 3 of Social Services & Wellbeing Act.

We are not confident people are being routinely offered direct payments, or that people receive sufficient support to enable them to make use of direct payments. The local authority must ensure people are provided with information on direct payment to enable them to exercise choice, voice and control and decide how best to meet their needs for care and support and achieve their personal outcomes. The local authority is fully aware of the need to develop this area, to date they have brought the Direct Payment Support Service in house in order to make improvements.

The need for advocacy is recognised. We saw evidence in the cases reviewed of people being supported by formal and informal advocates. We heard of the local authority's plans to introduce the Mind of My Own App to further improve communication and provide another means of communication for children and young people. We found the Welsh language 'Active Offer' being promoted, with people's first language recorded in a mandatory field within referral and assessment documentation.

Staff informed us of feeling safe and well supported during the pandemic, we found morale amongst staff generally positive. Staff valued the accessibility of managers including the senior management team along with informal peer support. This was particularly appreciated given the increase in demand and complexity of cases across both children's and adult services.

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

We found integrated infrastructures across health and social care working together jointly to embed preventative support for people. We found preventative services continuing to work and be developed through the pandemic, although with some services delivered virtually. The development of Community Connectors who work in the community to reduce social isolation has continued to grow, with new staff being employed with additional financial support from Aneurin Bevan University Health Board supporting the expansion of the service.

Preventative services continue to develop within children's services and have been strengthened through both a social work support and partnership approach to resource early intervention. With referrals screened by the multi-agency Vulnerable Childrens Panel, the most appropriate services such as The Family Focus service deliver targeted support through therapeutic intensive strength based interventions to prevent, where appropriate, children and families interacting with, or escalating through to the need for statutory services. We saw how a reviewed Threshold of Need policy is beginning to develop a shared understanding of universal and preventative services with partner agencies.

Considerable work has been undertaken through the transformation of children's services on safely reducing the number of children looked after, which is a recognised priority for the local authority. In the last year there has been a gradual reduction in the numbers of children becoming looked after. We saw how partner agencies worked alongside the local authority through the Complex Case Panel to ensure only the most appropriate cases entered the looked after system, and to review the pathway of care for those within the system for step down to alternative care options including returning to families. Staff and partners spoke of the significance of the Stepping Stones and My Support Team (MyST) who work intensively with families to prevent young people entering the care system. The authority have been proactive in the revocation of a number of care orders into Special Guardianship Orders ensuring the best outcomes are achieved for young people. Since 1st April 2020 there have been 25 SGO conversions and 35 Care Order discharges. Ongoing work continues with both the Courts and Child and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) on a pilot looking at accelerating the discharge of such orders through an intrusive process.

At a strategic level the health board and the local authority work closely together to prioritise supporting adults to remain in their own homes rather than care settings. An example of this is delivering Step up Support options for people to remain in their community by accessing services rather than unnecessary admittance to hospital.

Within adult services we saw and heard of how multi-agency professionals within Community Resource Team / Reablement worked collaboratively to support people's well-being and safety. We saw evidence of appropriate equipment and assisted technology being provided to support people's independence, well-being and safety. This enabled people to safely remain in their home whenever possible, avoiding the need for admission to hospital or residential care.

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

The local authority is a learning organisation which is open to external scrutiny and committed to continuous improvement. There is a clear understanding of both the benefits and challenges faced by the local authority. Independent audits and quality assurance work have clearly influenced service improvements and practice delivery, demonstrating a willingness to learn and to continue to progress.

Partnerships were found to be working well at all levels and delivering an integrated sustainable approach to meeting need and promoting well-being in line with legislation.

Providers spoke very positively of the support they had received from the local authority during the pandemic. They valued the level of communication and the quality of the timely advice and support. Many spoke of a culture of working collaboratively and how

relationships had been strengthened during the pandemic. A particular area of building a more collaborative working relationship has been between commissioning and care home providers. Many providers told us of good, open and honest dialogue to meet the significant challenges of the pandemic, with both reporting a greater degree of trust, openness and transparency in their working.

All partners spoke of the positive relationship with the safeguarding team. We found evidence of good collaboration between social services, the police, education and third sector working directly with people to meet their safety outcomes. We found positive examples of multi-agency approach to risk management and of practitioners identifying and monitoring vulnerable children and adults at risk. We saw well established partnership working with all relevant agencies where child protection concerns were identified.

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

Significant work with Housing and the health board has resulted in the building of Ty Glas Y Dorlan. This premises will provide a flexible range of accommodation with step up/step down options within the community. There will also be a range of multi-agency support services available which supports social inclusion for adults within Torfaen.

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

The local authority has exercised its functions under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and ensures it makes a positive contribution to the well-being of people who need care and support and carers who need support. There is strong commitment and political support for both adults and children's services and a thorough and well-developed understanding of their strengths and current challenges.

We found some evidence of people receiving 15 minute domiciliary service calls to help with personal care and food preparation. The local authority told us it assures itself of the timing of these calls through the review process. Providers indicated they are able to refer issues back if the tasks cannot be completed in a way that upholds the wellbeing of the individual. The local authority must assure itself all visits are of a sufficient length to ensure appropriate delivery of care and support identified to meet the assessed needs and contribute to enabling the person to meet their personal outcomes.

During the pandemic the local authority has proactively developed, adapted and delivered services in different ways to promote people's well-being. We saw examples of contingency

planning and prioritisation of service provision. We heard of many positive examples of how the provision of services/support had made a positive contribution to the safety and well-being of many people during the pandemic.

Within both adult and children's services we found safeguarding enquiries were responded to promptly, investigations conducted in line with statutory requirements with positive outcomes for people identified. Managers and practitioners expressed confidence that children in the authority were safe. This was evidenced in the files reviewed. Where children are at risk of significant harm, the response was timely and effective. The section 47 enquiries seen demonstrated good information gathering and there was evidence that children were seen/seen alone as appropriate at the enquiry stage.

Most of the assessments we reviewed were strengths-based, focusing on what matters to the person and the outcomes they wished to achieve. They were structured around the five elements of assessment and the product of conversation between the individual, carer/wider family and practitioners.

As with many local authorities, recruitment to both adult and children's services continues to be particularly challenging and where appointments have been possible they have tended to be social workers who are more recently qualified. Capacity issues coupled with case complexity was causing pressures in some teams. Senior managers spoke of challenges in recruiting to posts such as Occupational Therapists and Personal Assistants who support care leavers within 16+ team, an area where recruitment has not been an issue in the past. With the ongoing transformation of services looking to develop a number of new and existing services. The authority must ensure they have the process in place which allows them to be competitive with other local authorities who are all trying to recruit the most appropriate staff who have the capacity to implement safely any new and existing working practices to deliver the best outcomes for people.

Method:

- we reviewed documentation supplied in advance of our visit
- we spoke with more than 20 people, some people who are supported by services, their families and their carers.
- we reviewed 26 cases we held case tracking discussions on a further 10 case files
- we spoke with over 68 professional staff
- we held 9 focus groups

Next Steps:

We have identified strengths and areas for priority improvement and we will review the progress of these areas through our performance evaluation review meetings with the heads of service and director. We expect the areas of improvement we have identified to be

included in the local authority's improvement plans. We would like to extend our thanks to all those who helped with the arrangements for this assurance check and to those people and staff who spoke with us.

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Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lou Bushell-Bauers', with a small dot at the end.

Lou Bushell-Bauers
Head of Local Authority Inspection
Care Inspectorate Wales