

Wrexham County Borough Council

Report of Children's Services Risk Based follow up Inspection

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.
This document is also available in Welsh.

Children's Social Services: Risk Based Inspection (follow up)

Summary:

The commitment the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) to raise ambitions and expectations and drive improvement in children's social services in Wrexham remains unabated. The appointment of new chief officers across the local authority; a new director of social services and a completely new senior management team in children's social services is delivering a new confident culture within which positive social work practice can flourish.

The Accelerated Improvement Board established by the CEO in early 2020 is providing a structure and process for improved communication, which in turn is significantly improving leaders and senior manager's line of sight on front line practice. Further recent reflection and amendments to governance arrangements by senior leaders should ensure oversight and support for social services continues to improve.

Elected Members have engaged in 'task and finish' workshops and provided formal scrutiny of social care. There is an improved awareness of the complexity of social care and the implications for the council as a whole when demands on social care outstrip their ability to respond. As a result, officers and members are increasingly aware of the difficulties of recruitment and retention of social workers, budget allocation has increased and new ways of attracting an effective and efficient professional workforce to Wrexham become a priority.

The retention and recruitment of social workers is a national issue. However, the responsibility to provide a sufficient and suitably qualified workforce in Wrexham remains with the local authority. While seeking to recruit more social workers it is the responsibility of the local authority to ensure existing social work capacity in Wrexham is utilised effectively and efficiently. If the service is to continue its journey of improvement, leaders must look for fresh ideas and find new ways of attracting and maintaining a suitably qualified and experienced workforce.

In the 28 children's case files we reviewed during this inspection, we did not find any children to be at immediate risk of harm. We did find some very good quality professional social work practice delivered in highly complex cases including cases involving cross border issues, cultural complexity and significant crime.

We saw through reading case files how interventions by social workers employed by Wrexham County Borough Council are protecting vulnerable children from serious and significant harm. There is evidence of social workers working very effectively with professionals in health, education, police and the judiciary to protect vulnerable children in situations where people who have little or no regard for the safety or wellbeing of the children chose to exploit them for personal, often financial gain.

However, we also found gaps and delays in social work practice where attention to detail, professional curiosity, analysis and recording meant children and families were not getting the quality of service the local authority has a statutory duty to

provide. These gaps, delays and reductions in practice predominantly mirror reduced professional social worker capacity within specific teams at specific times.

At the front door to Wrexham children's services, we found good quality, timely decision making, with good professional analysis and recording. This is a positive improvement. We did not find this immediate good work always continued.

To ensure essential statutory duties are met ongoing plans for children in need of care and support and protection must continue to improve in quality and consistency. Managers must accept responsibility for their service areas and ensure they understand why social workers may not see children within statutory timescales, why familial case files miss opportunities to focus on individual siblings and why professional analysis and recording is not consistently meeting required standards.

Individual oversights, errors, omissions, changing expectations, perceptions and general anomalies in performance are an inevitable part of professional social work practice in increasingly complex societies. However, within a professional service, line management structures and clear lines of accountability should ensure lapses in practice remain isolated incidents and do not become service wide issues to the extent they negatively affect the lives of children and families.

More generally, the local authority recognises the importance of prevention and preventative services to support families in Wrexham and reduce demand on services. Reflection and recent initiatives to support more preventative work and engagement with the third sector is a positive step. The local authority must continue to support national initiatives to drive improvements in public and private services and make greater efforts to build social capital within communities and thereby develop sustainable solutions to local and national issues.

Turning around an underperforming social services department is extremely difficult. Doing this work at pace while coping with pandemic is a daunting challenge. The positive progress made to date by Wrexham local authority, in a relatively short time, provides assurance the local authority is firmly on a journey of improvement.

It is now foreseeable that given further time and appropriate continued support Wrexham children's social services can move on from its history of repeated short-term improvement and rapid decline to become the sustainable high quality service families in Wrexham are entitled to expect.

We thank everyone who contributed to this inspection and supported CIW in carrying out our duties.

Key findings and evidence:

We present some key findings and evidence below in line with the four principles of the 2014 Act. Improvements required in previous CIW reports may also appear in this report to emphasise their relevance and importance at this time. However, previous requirements for improvements, which remain outstanding but not referred to in this report are not negated by omission here.

It is our intention to undertake a more comprehensive performance evaluation inspection and report of Wrexham's children's services in summer 2022.

People - voice and choice

Strengths:

1. Recording of children's voices in case files has improved in both quantity and quality. Some case files evidenced good or very good recording of children's voices.
2. Increasing numbers of internal applicants have applied for and been appointed to management positions. Practitioners told us their willingness to apply for promotions reflected their growing confidence in the new leadership team and their support for a new more confident 'can do' culture of high expectations and good support.
3. Leadership and management changes in children's social services are complete. Recently appointed senior managers are able to demonstrate a robust understanding of social work practice and theory, providing the professional knowledge required to support improvement in social work practice across the service.
4. Evidence of confident and competent independent Reviewing and Safeguarding Officers (IRSOs) positively challenging omissions in social work practice and continuing their challenges to point of positive resolution.

What needs to improve:

1. Social work caseloads of practitioners are again beginning to rise; managers will need to ensure caseloads remain manageable to ensure continued improvements in quality of social work practice.
2. Caseload management and support to resolve challenges faced by front line practitioners is essential to the retention of qualified and experienced practitioners. Managers must maintain oversight of workloads and workflow and offer support at the right time to ensure consistent delivery of high quality services.
3. Improvements in quality of social work practice must become mainstream across all social work teams. For example; managers and practitioners must ensure

decisions are timely and evidence based. Case files must always contain the rationale for decisions made.

4. Managers must ensure high quality supervision and management support across all service areas. Supervision should provide opportunity for personal and professional reflection, constructive challenge and direction setting. Including professional reflection on current practice.
5. All shortfalls identified by IRSOs should be resolved efficiently and effectively by managers for the benefit of the child. All IRSOs must be encouraged to fulfil their duties to the high standard demonstrated in some cases seen.
6. Some social workers need to be reminded English legislation for care leaver's i.e. staying put arrangements are not relevant for Wales. Wales does have a unique culture and identity which must be respected.

Well-being

Strengths:

1. Timely and proportionate response to most referrals at first point of contact.
2. Management oversight and challenge to drive improvements in practice at the front door to social services is evident.
3. Child protection referrals trigger safeguarding mechanisms appropriately and support relevant information sharing between police, education and children's services.
4. Evidence of understanding theory in practice was found in reference to research about adverse childhood experiences and risks associated with growing up with physical chastisement
5. Practitioners report an increased confidence in the more open and ambitious culture of the local authority.
6. Senior leaders were able to demonstrate an increased understanding of the pressures faced by front line social care practitioners and the management and leadership required to ensure services function to a high standard

What needs to improve:

1. Managers must ensure accumulating concerns of child neglect and domestic abuse, evidenced through repeat referrals, are always recognised and result in offers of support and effective interventions to prevent harm and long term neglect.

2. Social workers must work in partnership with families to agree achievable, realistic goals for improvement. Building trust and improving communication were high priorities in some but not all cases seen.
3. Excessive mixing of sibling's information on the same case file detracts from the focus on each individual child. While family background information is relevant to each child in the family the extent to which information is cut and paste from one file to another meant in some files, the unique characteristics, needs and strengths of each child and the support they require was sometimes missed in the bigger family picture.
4. The 2014 Act requires the wellbeing of people who work in social care be recognised, supported and respected. There must be sufficient staffing at all levels to ensure managers and practitioners have capacity to complete their work to the required standard and prevent burn out of practitioners.
5. Leaders must to ensure the social work capacity at manager and practitioner level is utilised effectively and efficiently to deliver social work duties. It is not helpful if their time is distracted into duties that could be completed by others. For example only, human resources (HR) tasks.
6. The revolving door of practitioners in and out of services is not a good use of time and resources. Managers should consider whether adequate induction and support is available to retain newly appointed practitioners.

Prevention

Strengths:

1. Early intervention in line with the requirements of the 2014 Act remains an important strategic driver for the local authority. The launch of a new strategy with clear timescales to support prevention and early intervention is a positive step. Leaders should consider how building social capital in local communities may help reduce demand on social care services.
2. The Information advice and assistance (IAA) service is operational and signposts to early intervention and prevention. There are plans in place to develop this process and relaunch with improved information technology.
3. Legal gateway meetings reviewed were positive, well managed and provided appropriate advice and guidance to practitioners
4. Work to support embedding of new guidance around public law process is detailed and specific, offering the best opportunity for positive embedding of improvements.

5. The numbers of looked after children has remained relatively stable despite the local authority taking action to address previous drift and delays in some case files. This performance indicator suggests the local authority is working hard to support children within their families.

What needs to improve:

1. Chronologies and case summaries are now evident in many casefiles seen. Practitioners and managers must not underestimate the importance of good recording and analysis to consistently good outcome focused support for children and families.
2. Children's assessments must adequately address all five components of the assessment process. Strengths within the family must be recognised and their barriers to achieving positive outcomes explored and addressed.
3. Care and support/protection plans/reviews must focus on the outcomes for the child, be realistic for families, and written in plain language to enable all involved to understand and measure progress.
4. Social workers must undertake visits to children within statutory timescales. Managers should address any lapses in statutory duties in real time to ensure risks are managed and children benefit from their professional oversight and support.
5. The local authority has identified its own areas for improvements in its recording and monitoring of service delivery. These changes should be actioned without delay and the cyclical process of monitoring and improvement strengthened. There is already some good reflective practice captured by practice managers which could be embedded further and become 'business as usual'.

Partnerships

Strengths:

1. Recent refresh and relaunch of thresholds for access to services should ensure partners have a shared understanding of when children require and become entitled to differing levels of support.
2. The accelerated improvement board is working effectively to drive improvements across children's services. Practitioners describe the new approach as a journey of improvement with a senior management team who are more children focused.
3. Strong corporate commitment continues to develop with engagement of elected members through task and finish groups and improved supportive scrutiny. Members describe improving their knowledge of social care through walk around

visits and discussions with managers. Inspectors drew member's attention to the importance of the SSWBA as a primary driver of local authority statutory duties. Inspectors encouraged members to engage further with managers and challenge them on their understanding and adherence to codes of practice and practice guidance.

4. Positive working relationships with the regional safeguarding board and neighbouring Welsh local authorities is ensuring Wrexham children's services have a professional support structure from which they draw experience, knowledge and support.
5. Changing patterns of work in response to the pandemic has been a huge challenge and learning opportunity. Opportunities to experience different ways of working has freed up travel time and built trust between managers and practitioners.

What needs to improve:

1. Social workers must work in partnership with parents as equals. They must ensure parents are informed of opportunities to have someone of their choice to support them to participate fully in assessment and reviews
2. The rigour and impact of management oversight must be sufficient to ensure children are not missed and local authority intervention in family life is grounded in good practice. Social workers and managers must work openly with families as partners. A plan for each child must be progressed and children protected from foreseeable harm.
3. The drive to increase Special Guardianship arrangements has delivered improved outcomes for some children and families. The local authority have learnt lessons from this process and is looking to address next steps in service development to 'business as usual'.
4. The authority must ensure a sufficient, qualified and competent workforce to meet its statutory duties. Senior Managers are continuing with innovative ways of overcoming this deficit. Never the less, the ability of the local authority to consistently meet its statutory duties remains a challenge until the balance of permanent and agency staff is resolved.
5. The local authority must continue to develop and improve their working relationship with the third sector. Many third sector agencies work effectively in Wrexham. The local authority should consider how to build effective working relationships based upon trust and shared responsibility to build community capacity.

