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Ein cyf / Our ref:

Dyddiad / Date: 22/12/2022

Dear Director,

Improvement Check visit to Bridgend County Borough Council Children's Service

This letter summarises the findings of Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) improvement check of Bridgend County Borough Council ('BCBC' / 'the local authority') Children's Service on 21–24 November 2022. This was the first improvement check following the performance evaluation inspection (PEI) of BCBC Children's Service in May 2022.

Introduction

We carry out inspection activity in accordance with the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014; key lines of enquiry; and the quality standards in the *Code of Practice in relation to the performance and improvement of social services in Wales*. This helps us determine the effectiveness of local authorities in supporting, measuring, and sustaining improvements for people and in services.

The Improvement Check focussed on the progress made in the following areas identified for improvements during our last PEI in May 2022:

Principle	Areas of improvement identified from PEI - May 2022	Progress identified from improvement check - November 2022
People	Seeking, hearing (including the use of direct work) and recording the voice of the child	Significant improvements made and must be sustained
People	People consistently feel listened to and treated with dignity and respect	Some improvements made; further action is required

People	Workforce recruitment and retention	Some improvements made; further action is required
People	Management oversight	Significant improvements made and must be sustained
People	Staff support, supervision, and training	Some improvements made; further action is required
Prevention	Provision of information, advice, and assistance (IAA). People receive the right support at the right time	Some improvements made; further action is required
Partnerships	Thresholds for early help and statutory services	Some improvements made; further action is required
Partnerships	Learning from reviews and audits	Some improvements made; further action is required
Well-being	Compliance with statutory responsibilities	Some improvements made; further action is required
Well-being	Arrangements for supervised contact between children and their families	Some improvements made; further action is required
Well-being	Identification and response to child exploitation	Some improvements made; further action is required

1. Summary of findings

- 1.1. During our PEI in May 2022, we identified BCBC, like many local authorities across Wales, had experienced challenges in the provision of social care. Many of the pressures experienced by the local authority's children's services reflected recovery from the Covid pandemic including high levels of demand and increased complexity of people's needs. Critical deficits in the number of social workers, because of recruitment and retention issues, along with staff absences and a highly competitive market, had resulted in the loss of experienced staff and a reliance on newly qualified and agency social workers. Whilst the local authority continues to take significant action to address the challenges of recruitment and retention, this remains a significant pressure. High numbers of agency staff are being used to fill gaps in teams, including some management posts. The workforce position remains fragile. The local authority is aware of the fundamental importance of having a stable and sufficient workforce to ensure there is sufficient capacity and capability to drive forward and sustain improvements.
- 1.2. The local authority is experiencing rising numbers of children who are subject to child protection registration, care experienced children,¹ and children receiving care and support. There continues to be an increase in the numbers of contacts/referrals received and a high level of demand for services coupled

¹ A child or young person who is either looked after or who has previously been looked after by a local authority under legislation.

with increased complexity in the needs of children and families, which BCBC is responding to within the context of increasing financial pressures. Leaders have a good line of sight on the current situation in children's services. The Chief Executive of BCBC continues to chair the Improving Outcomes for Children Board, which was set up in March 2022. The Board has made a positive impact through improved oversight of children's services and early help services, ensuring there is sufficient information about, and scrutiny of, performance.

- 1.3. Leaders and senior managers are committed to making improvements to support children's well-being. There continues to be a strong focus and a considerable amount of work underway to secure and monitor improvements in children's services. Improved systems have been implemented to monitor compliance and areas of risk and potential risk. The local authority has commissioned external expertise to support with identifying how well services are working, and how services can be improved or refined to maximise their impact and outcomes for children and families. The local authority continues to commission a programme of independent quality assurance to provide ongoing assessment of the strengths and areas for development in children's services and to inform practice development.
- 1.4. On 24 November 2022, the Cwm Taf Morgannwg Safeguarding Board published the Child Practice Review in relation to the tragic death of Logan Mwangi. The Board and the agencies involved with Logan and his family during his short life, have accepted in full the findings of the Child Practice Review. The Safeguarding Board and the local authority have stated they will implement the review recommendations. We will monitor the local authority's progress regarding implementation of recommendations through our ongoing performance review activity.
- 1.5. The local authority has strengthened managerial oversight and quality assurance, resulting in some positive developments in practice. Significant improvement plans have been formulated and new posts in children's services have been introduced to assist in driving plans forward. Implementation and embedding of improvement plans continue to be work in progress. However, the fragility of the workforce position remains a significant risk to the local authority achieving and sustaining improvements. **The local authority must continue to assure itself of the priority status, pace, quality, delivery, and impact of its improvement activity.**

Key findings and evidence

Key findings and some examples of evidence are presented below in line with the four principles of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014.

2. People

Strengths:

- 2.1. Action has been taken to ensure the voice of the child is consistently sought and listened to, and consideration is given to the lived experience of the child. We saw the use of pen pictures which included the child's history, and use of tools to help to facilitate the child's views and wishes and to aid

communication to improve understanding and safety for children. The increased focus on promoting the voice of the child was evident in our discussions with staff, as was the increased management oversight in relation to children's social care records.

- 2.2. There were examples of assessments that clearly articulated the context of the complex and challenging family circumstances of some children, with a focus on understanding the uniqueness of individual children. We also saw examples of direct work undertaken with children to help understand the child's lived experience, the presenting risks and to assist in identifying issues/concerns.
- 2.3. Overall, the local authority continues to give regard to the rights of children to be offered independent professional advocacy. We saw examples of children being provided with the active offer of advocacy. Given the increase in the number of care experienced children, the local authority is working with the independent advocacy provider to ensure the active offer of advocacy is consistently provided.
- 2.4. The newly appointed corporate parenting and participation officer is promoting improved engagement and involvement of care experienced children and young people. Several consultation and engagement activities have taken place with care experienced children including consultation on what makes a 'good parent,' what it is like to be 'in care' or a 'care leaver,' and what are the important issues for care experienced children.
- 2.5. Following the PEI action has been taken to ensure that the meaningful offer of a carers assessment at the point of contact is made and recorded.
- 2.6. The local authority has undertaken a review of its direct payment scheme. A face-to-face engagement event with those individuals/carers in receipt of direct payments is due to be held in December 2022. Work is in progress to explore innovative and creative solutions, including the use of direct payments and family help services as part of care and support arrangements.
- 2.7. Recruitment, retention, and workforce well-being continue to be priority areas for the local authority. Significant action has been taken to address the recruitment and retention issues for example enhanced marketing campaigns, international recruitment, 'Grow our own Social Work Programme,' and implementation of market supplements.
- 2.8. A bespoke management and leadership programme has been commissioned to support managers/leaders to develop their skills including the development of team culture and practice, performance management, quality assurance and coaching and mentoring. These skills are important in driving forward improvement plans and supporting staff particularly during times of workforce pressures, increased workforce anxiety and significant change.
- 2.9. Staff continue to work tirelessly to manage an increasing volume of work coupled with the increasing complexity of need. Staff are working in an environment of significant change due to the implementation of improvement plans, with increased management oversight and scrutiny. Staff spoke of the positive impact of the changes being implemented, including improved quality

assurance and oversight. Staff also told us about opportunities for reflective practice and introduction of peer supervision.

- 2.10. Staff we spoke with felt supported by managers and confirmed they felt confident to raise with their managers any concerns they may have. We saw there had been several management changes within the care experienced children's team, which had impacted on the level and consistency of management support provided. The recent appointment of a permanent team manager aims to provide management stability, consistency, and support.
- 2.11. There has been a reduction of some caseloads. Workloads were generally described as busy but manageable. Implementation of the Social Work Support Officer Model (from December 2022) should increase capacity for practitioners to concentrate on practice and free them up from some administrative functions.
- 2.12. Most staff we spoke with confirmed they had received Back to Basics training, which introduced the concept of Signs of Safety.² The aim of this training is to build a strong foundation to further develop, enhance, and reflect on social work practice within the safeguarding arena. **The local authority should evaluate the impact of this training, including the impact on outcomes for children and families and buy-in from staff.**
- 2.13. We saw increased opportunities for staff to reflect and embed learning. Training on professional curiosity is now mandatory, a training programme is in place. We saw some examples of how professional curiosity was appropriately applied in practice. Staff spoke of how access to on-line training/development resources were beneficial for their professional development. **This is improved practice and should continue.**
- 2.14. The local authority has reviewed and re-launched the Newly Qualified Social Worker 'Supporting your First Three Years in Practice' framework, to ensure that all newly qualified social workers are supported through transition from graduate to newly qualified social worker. Fourteen newly qualified social workers (including agency workers) commenced the programme in October 2022, which requires them to complete a mandatory training pathway and an additional development programme. It is important staff have the capacity to undertake training and maximise development opportunities.

Areas for improvement:

- 2.15. **The local authority must continue to work towards ensuring a sufficient and sustainable workforce, with the capacity and capability to consistently meet statutory responsibilities.**
- 2.16. Whilst there has clearly been a significant focus on promoting the voice of the child, the quality of recording in relation to capturing children's voices remains

² Signs of Safety approach is a relationship-grounded, safety-organised approach to child protection practice, created by researching what works for professionals and families in building meaningful safety for vulnerable and at-risk children. The approach expands the investigation of risk to encompass family and individual strengths, periods of safety and good care that can be built upon to stabilise and strengthen a child's and family's situation. The approach is designed to be used from commencement through to case closure in order to assist professionals at all stages of the child protection process.

variable. Work is on-going in relation to the quality of recording, including the forthcoming launch of the recording policy for social workers and managers, which is planned for December 2022. **The local authority should continue to monitor the quality of social care records ensuring recording in relation to siblings, ethnicity, language, religion is strengthened, and a consistent approach taken.**

- 2.17. Some teams have experienced turnover of staff and or changes of management. We saw staff turnover had adversely impacted on consistency of workers for some children and families, presenting challenges regarding relationship building. Whilst social care records indicated respectful working with families, we received mixed feedback from a small number of people regarding how well they felt they were listened to and treated with dignity and respect. **The local authority must ensure people consistently feel listened to and treated with dignity and respect.**

3. Prevention

Strengths:

- 3.1. Quality assurance arrangements have been strengthened to provide leaders with a better understanding of performance including compliance with statutory requirements, gaps/pressures in service provision and quality of intervention.
- 3.2. It was evident the resources put into the IAA service this year, including additional staffing and management oversight, has positively impacted on the timeliness of screening contacts/referrals, and has provided staff with opportunities to improve practice. We could see how the improvements were beginning to positively impact on outcomes for some children and families.
- 3.3. The local authority is experiencing a significant increase in contacts/referrals, for example there was a 32% increase in the number of contacts/referrals received during the period April to August 2022, compared with the same period in 2021. Most of the contacts/referrals received are from partner agencies (health, police, education). This has resulted in an increase in the number of Section 47 enquiries³ undertaken, safeguarding strategy discussions held, and assessments and care and support plans completed. The impact of the increased demand has been felt across children's social services and early help services.
- 3.4. We saw examples of the local authority and partners responding promptly and effectively to meet the needs of children, especially where acute need and risk was identified. For example, the local authority, police, and other relevant agencies were able to convene strategy meetings at short notice. The subsequent planning was focused and based on good exchange of information across agencies. This resulted in assistance being offered to parents which was appropriate and proportionate to presenting need and risk. We saw examples of the local authority working with care providers to support

³ Section 47(1) of the Children Act 1989 contains duties which require a local authority to make, or cause to be made, such enquiries as it considers necessary to enable it to decide whether it should take any action to safeguard or promote the child's welfare.

them in responding to children's needs and areas of risk. **This is positive practice and should continue.**

- 3.5. There is a good range of early help and edge of care services available to support children and families. Work is in progress to look at best practice across BCBC early help, children's social services and edge of care services with the aim of preventing children's needs escalating and requiring protection.
- 3.6. The local authority has commissioned an independent review of children's services to evaluate its operating models. Early help services and edge of care services will be included in this review and any subsequent action planning as a result.

Areas for improvement:

- 3.7. There is unmet demand for services to support children and young people's emotional well-being. At the time of the improvement check there were 76 young people on the waiting list for the Youth Emotional Wellbeing Team (this is a reduction from April 2022 when there were 119 children on the waiting list for this service). We were informed all children referred had been screened and were being offered alternative support (such as school-based counselling, well-being workers that form part of a wider offer), where appropriate. As it is the responsibility of health boards and local authorities to support people's mental health and well-being, it is important they work together to identify and address unmet needs in relation to mental health and emotional well-being. **The local authority must continue to closely monitor the position of children's social services and early help services to ensure any indicators of risks to achieving and sustaining improvement and compliance with statutory responsibilities, and pressure/ gaps in service provision are quickly identified and the required action is taken.**
- 3.8. Action has been taken to increase staff awareness of early help services; however, some staff were unclear about availability and accessibility of some early help services. **The local authority should ensure systems are in place to provide all staff, with up to date information regarding availability and accessibility of early help services and records relating to intervention of early help services.**
- 3.9. In common with other local authorities, BCBC is experiencing pressure in relation to sufficiency of appropriate residential placements for care experienced children. There are a small number of children who are currently placed in services providing care and support that are not registered as required by law. The local authority has a development plan in place to increase the sufficiency of residential provision for care experienced children. Work is also in progress with national and regional partners through the National Fostering Framework to increase the numbers of foster carers in Bridgend County, including carers who have additional skills and experience in caring for children who would otherwise require residential care, or are moving on from such provision. **The local authority must ensure children are not placed in unregistered services and must continue its efforts to identify suitable, registered placements.**

4. Partnership

Strengths:

- 4.1. We saw collaborative partnership working at operational and strategic levels. This is critical to ensure improvements are delivered and sustained, and the well-being of children and families is consistently promoted and protected, and the local authority has a professional support network from which it can draw expertise, knowledge, support, and constructive challenge. A Bridgend Children's Summit was recently held with all key partners at Chief Executive level to agree the vision and priorities for integrated working for children and families in Bridgend County. **This is positive practice and should continue.**
- 4.2. Opportunities for agencies to work effectively together through child protection processes were embraced by partners. We saw examples of partners exchanging information which enabled a good understanding of both presenting risk and family context relevant to circumstances. The local authority and partner agencies are reviewing the information sharing platforms. Overall, social care records and feedback from staff demonstrated generally good information exchange, and a mutual understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities. Arrangements are in place for partners to constructively challenge and share/escalate concerns. The fortnightly Joint Operational Group meeting provides regular opportunity for constructive challenge and continuous improvement between partners. **This is improved practice and should continue.**

Areas for improvement:

- 4.3. Work is underway with both internal and external partners to ensure clarity and consistency of thresholds for access to early help and statutory services. **The local authority must prioritise this work to ensure children and families access the right support at the right time and ensure smooth access to services, and where required smooth transition between early help / preventative and statutory services.** Given the increase in demand for support/services the provision of timely early help is likely to alleviate the level of demand on statutory services.

5. Well-being

Strengths:

- 5.1. Actions taken by the local authority, in relation to its IAA service, has assisted to stabilise this service to ensure contacts/referrals are now consistently screened within 24 hours, with improved management oversight. The ability and capacity to respond to immediate safeguarding needs and crisis is a positive improvement for the local authority and partner agencies, with prompt and timely responses consistently evident.
- 5.2. We found initial child protection conferences, child protection reviews and reviews of care experienced children are being held in accordance with statutory timescales, as are reviews for care experienced children and reviews of support or financial support for children with Special Guardianship

Orders. We also found timely and appropriate action had been taken in relation to episodes of children going missing.⁴

- 5.3. There are some good examples of practitioner assessments, which demonstrate both a wider understanding of family context and a focus on risk. We saw use of genograms, chronologies and historical information being used to inform decision making and assessments. We noted an improvement in the quality of workload supervision records, which generally detailed action to be taken and follow up of actions. Several internal and independent audits have taken place to inform managers line of sight on practice and to identify improvements and good practice.
- 5.4. The local authority and partners identify any immediate learning from critical events and child practice reviews. For example, following a recent child practice review staff in the case management teams and the independent chairs of child protection conferences and reviews were reminded of the statutory duty to inform any person who holds parental responsibility for a child, of child protection concerns.
- 5.5. We saw evidence of young people and parents and carers being involved in the safeguarding process. For example, we saw how an interpreter had been used to communicate with a parent, in their first language, ensuring the parent could understand the safeguarding concerns of the local authority. The local authority has committed to developing a parent's charter to understand better, and act on, parents experience of working with children's social services. **This is improved practice and should continue.**

Areas for improvement

- 5.6. Performance indicators in relation to timeliness of meeting statutory requirements in some areas (as detailed above) were generally good. **The local authority must maintain focus and scrutiny on ensuring compliance with all its statutory responsibilities.**
- 5.7. Whilst work in relation to child exploitation has commenced on both a local and regional level, the local authority is at an early stage of change management in respect of implementing and embedding consistent practice regarding identifying and responding to child exploitation. **The local authority must progress this work as a matter of urgency.** The recent appointment of a lead role regarding child exploitation may assist in driving this work forward.
- 5.8. Arranging contact between children and members of their families continues to present challenges for some staff in relation to workload management. The social care records we reviewed did not evidence direct impact of this on children and families. **This is an area that the local authority should continue to closely monitor.**

⁴ The All Wales Practice Guide – *Safeguarding children who go missing from home or care*, defines a child as missing when their whereabouts cannot be established, they will be considered as missing until located and their wellbeing or otherwise confirmed.

6. Next steps

- 6.1. During our PEI in May 2022, we identified a number of areas requiring improvements and where we had significant concerns. At this improvement check we found improvements have been made, however further actions are needed to ensure the well-being of children and families is consistently promoted and protected. It remains that the local authority's children's services require improvement.
- 6.2. We will continue to closely monitor through our ongoing performance review activities the progress made by the local authority in securing the improvements required. We recommend the local authority maximise opportunities to share and learn from positive practice.
- 6.3. This inspection letter will be published to our website. The local authority will be expected to present the letter to elected members and subject it to public scrutiny through a formal and open committee meeting at the earliest opportunity.

7. Methodology

- 7.1. Most inspection evidence was gathered by reviewing the experiences of people through reading and tracking of their social care records. We reviewed 25 social care records and of these we tracked 6. Tracking a person's social care record includes where possible, having conversations with the person in receipt of social care services, their family or carers, key worker, the key worker's manager, and other professionals involved.

We also:

- Spoke with 46 local authority employees (including some agency staff) from across various local authority departments
- Spoke with 3 people using services
- Spoke with a partner organisation and a care provider
- Spoke with the Chief Executive of BCBC
- Spoke with BCBC Lead Cabinet Member for Social Services and Early Help
- Spoke with the Chair of the Cwm Taf Morgannwg Safeguarding Board
- Requested and reviewed supporting documentation provided by the local authority
- Observed the Improving Outcomes for Children Board
- Observed two BCBC Scrutiny Committees
- Listened to a presentation delivered by the local authority senior management team, which focused on the local authority's improvement journey following the PEI and the current position of the authority's children's service

8. Welsh Language

- 8.1. The inspection team included a Welsh speaking inspector, enabling CIW to make the active offer of conducting parts of the inspection process in Welsh.

9. Acknowledgements

9.1. CIW would like to thank everyone who gave their time and contributed to this inspection.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lou Bushell-Bauers', written in a cursive style.

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