

Buffy Williams MS  
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Committee [SeneddChildren@Senedd.Wales](mailto:SeneddChildren@Senedd.Wales)

Eich cyf/Your ref:

Ein cyf / Our ref:

Dyddiad / Date: 4 March 2026

Dear Buffy Williams MS,

Thank you for your letter of 9 February 2026 following the Committee's scrutiny session on 28 January. We welcome the opportunity to provide further clarity on Care Inspectorate Wales's (CIW) strategic role within the children's social care system, and to reaffirm our commitment to improving outcomes for children and young people across Wales.

We recognise the Committee's significant focus on children's social care throughout the Sixth Senedd and share your concerns about the systemic pressures that have contributed to variation in quality, safeguarding practice, governance, and children's lived experiences. As Wales's independent inspectorate for social care, we take seriously our responsibility to identify risk, highlight learning, and use our voice to support national, regional, and local improvement.

What follows addresses each of the Committee's questions.

**1. CIW's strategic role for local authority social services: How does CIW ensure that its own inspections and its joint inspections of local authorities, its thematic reviews and its intelligence works to build a coherent picture of system performance across Wales? Are there effective mechanisms in place for CIW to identify patterns, escalate concerns to Welsh Government and support the improvement across local authorities?**

CIW operates a risk-based inspection and assurance model, informed by our Intelligence, Performance and Risk Management (IPERM) framework. IPERM enables us to synthesise

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

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.

information from inspections, notifications, complaints, regulatory activity, and partner intelligence to identify emerging risks, patterns, and variation across Wales.

Our system-level oversight is strengthened through:

### **Joint inspections and thematic reviews**

- **Joint inspections** with Estyn and Healthcare Inspectorate Wales allow us to examine children’s experiences across organisational boundaries and understand how the wider system functions, rather than evaluating a single agency in isolation.
- **Thematic national reviews** intentionally look across Wales to hold a "mirror to the system"—highlighting strengths, areas of concern, and learning that applies to all local authorities.

Our [Child Protection Rapid Review in 2022 – 23](#) and [Joint Inspection of Child Protection Arrangements 2019 – 2024](#) are recent significant examples of work with other inspectorates to provide a system wide approach to considering local authority performance.

These approaches were developed precisely because traditional single-agency inspections could not fully account for system-level risks.

Our [Chief Inspector’s Annual Report for 2024-25](#) at page 38 sets out the important areas for improvement arising from our work in local authorities – including the need for more consistent application of thresholds and timescales as required by the Wales Safeguarding Procedures.

### **Intelligence sharing and escalation mechanisms**

We maintain structured engagement with Welsh Government policy officials, including regular meetings with the Social Services Directorate. These discussions allow us to raise concerns early—particularly in relation to safeguarding, workforce, governance, and thresholds for intervention.

When CIW identifies serious, cumulative, sustained or systemic failings within a local authority it activates its formal Services Requiring Significant Improvement (SRSI) process. A service designated as requiring significant improvement is immediately subject to an Improvement Conference, involving senior leaders and all relevant partners, where CIW sets out the priority actions, evidence expectations and timelines for change. This is followed by enhanced monitoring, which can include increased inspection activity, targeted evidence reviews, and frequent assurance meetings to track progress and ensure risks and actions are being appropriately managed.

We also work closely with Social Care Wales (SCW), sharing relevant insight and ensuring alignment around sector-led improvement. In addition to being the workforce regulator, SCW’s role is to lead improvement in social care in Wales – including improvement in local authorities. CIW is a member of the newly established Strategic Implementation Group for Improvement to be chaired by SCW and the National Office for Care and Support in Welsh

Government. Through our contribution to the work of this group, we will continue to provide learning from our inspection, intelligence, and strategic engagement and contribute to national system learning.

While CIW is not an improvement agency we can identify issues, guide, and support improvement. Our approach to local authority inspection reflects the principles of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014. The approach is underpinned by four core principles: voice and control, prevention and early intervention, well-being, and partnership working. We seek to recognise the strengths in the system and also be clear about the areas for improvement.

However, we do not have the power to require change in local authority leadership, resourcing, or strategic direction.

**2. Learning from inspections: How does CIW assure itself – and us – that issues in inspection reports relating to the performance of social services are swiftly highlighted to other local authorities? We note that a joint CIW and Estyn inspection was carried out following the Gwynedd review. What changes, if any, will CIW be making to its future inspections to ensure cultural failings, weak governance or non-compliance with established safeguarding processes and guidance are always identified in inspection reports?**

We agree with the Committee's emphasis on learning and dissemination. In recent months, we have strengthened our internal processes so that all inspection reports are automatically shared with every Director of Social Services across Wales, ensuring rapid awareness of cross-cutting themes.

In future inspections, we will:

- Further strengthen scrutiny of culture, leadership openness, and governance.
- Build upon learning from the Gwynedd Child Practice Review.
- Embed work arising from our positive cultures programme, which aims to support inspectors to better understand organisational culture, professional curiosity, and psychological safety.
- Enhance internal reflection so that we continually refine our methods and improve the conditions in which children, staff, and partners feel safe sharing concerns with inspectors.

We remain disappointed that during past work—including the 2018 inspection in Gwynedd—issues that later emerged through the Child Practice Review were not raised nor disclosed to inspectors. This reinforces the importance of building cultures of honesty, openness, and shared learning.

### **3. Voice of the child: How is CIW strengthening its own approach to hearing directly from children and young people? How does this test whether children’s voices genuinely influence inspection outcomes?**

CIW recognises children’s experiences and views must meaningfully shape inspection outcomes. Across the full inspection programme – local authority services, regulated services, childcare and play, fostering and adoption, and thematic work – the voice of the child is central.

We:

- Speak directly with children during all regulated services inspections (residential care and childcare and play).
- Seek to engage children during local authority inspections. Inspectors now draw on a broad range of engagement methods—including direct conversations (where children wish to engage), phone or email follow-ups, surveys, observation of day-to-day interactions, and insights from advocates, social workers, Independent Reviewing Officers, complaints and notifications.
- Work with the Children’s Commissioner for Wales, who sits on our National Advisory Board.
- Produced the resource, “[What Good Care Looks Like](#),” developed with children and young people to describe what they want from residential care, resulting in Welsh Government producing national “[Guidance for registering a care home for children](#)”
- Continue to explore new ways of involving children more consistently in or local authority inspections, including through young carers’ groups, youth forums, and pre-inspection engagement activities led by inspection managers. For example, in advance of a forthcoming inspection of children’s services in Blaenau Gwent, we recently attended a young carers’ forum and a group run by the local authority to provide emotional support for children who have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).

We acknowledge there is more to do, particularly to diversify the voices we hear and avoid over-reliance on the same small group of young advisors already engaged across Welsh Government consultations.

We will continue strengthening our approach and testing the success of how children’s views materially shape our judgments.

### **4. Oversight and knowledge gaps: There is a lack of Welsh-specific oversight in Deprivation of Liberty (DoL) cases applying to children as was highlighted in our session and as set out in our previous scrutiny work. What role does CIW believe it should play in addressing this gap, and where do you believe responsibility should sit for maintaining oversight of children subject to Deprivation of Liberty orders and those living in unregistered settings?**

## Deprivation of Liberty Orders (DoLs)

The Committee is right to highlight the lack of a national Welsh mechanism to collate DoLs data for children.

Currently:

- There is no statutory duty on local authorities to notify CIW of children subject to DoLs orders.
- Some intelligence emerges indirectly through our inspections or through the residential care sector, but this is incomplete.
- The number of notifications we received from providers about children living in care homes subject to DoLs has risen significantly—from 16 in 2023/24 to 50 in 2024/25. We believe this increase happened because we issued guidance to providers in February 2024.

In our view, a national data collection mechanism, potentially through the local authority 'Checkpoint' dataset could be a potential solution. This would ensure visibility for Welsh Government, local authorities, the Family Court, and inspectorates alike.

## Children in unregistered settings

CIW continues to monitor services operating without registration and take enforcement action where appropriate. However:

- There is no statutory duty requiring local authorities to notify us of unregistered placements; current arrangements are based on agreement and practice, not law.
- While we receive information about unregistered settings, we do not hold nor require detailed data about individual children, as this is neither necessary nor appropriate for our regulatory role.
- Local authorities hold statutory responsibility for ensuring these placements are safe and temporary, and for securing registered placements as soon as possible.

We would welcome a whole-system discussion on the adequacy of current notification duties.

**5. Financial pressures: We are aware of reports that some private providers of accommodation for children in care have doubled their placements costs during the implementation of the legislation to restrict profit. How concerned is CIW about the impact of this on local authority budgets and in turn the delivery and stability of children's social services in the short to medium term?**

We have heard anecdotal reports some for-profit providers are significantly increasing placement fees during the transition period toward eliminating profit from children's services. We have also heard of similar cost increases among some not-for-profit providers.

However:

- We have not received widespread evidence from local authorities that their budgets are destabilised specifically because of the “eliminate profit” reforms.
- We are aware children’s social services budgets across Wales are routinely under pressure, and this remains a long-standing concern.
- Our priority is always ensuring children receive safe, appropriate placements, and will closely monitor the impact on children as reforms progress.

The transition period up to 2030 is welcome as it enables the essential transition from for profit to not for profit services. Nevertheless, there is uncertainty, including questions about adequate and appropriate future supply of care home places for children. We will continue to share intelligence with Welsh Government as the market evolves.

## **6. Looking ahead: What is the single most important message you would wish to convey to the next Welsh Government about the challenges facing Care Inspectorate Wales and its work in trying to ensure the provision of quality services for children and young people?**

The next Welsh Government will have a critical opportunity to ensure CIW is sufficiently resourced and empowered to deliver its functions, and that inspectorates and improvement bodies across the system are aligned in purpose, data sharing, and ambition. Our ambition in CIW is only bounded by the resources available.

Ensuring the provision of quality services for children and young people requires shared leadership across local authorities, health boards, inspectorates, regulators and Welsh Government. No single body can achieve this alone. A coordinated, multi-agency approach—supported by clear accountability and data —will be essential to achieving further meaningful change.

## **7. Additional information requested by the Committee**

### **1. How extensively CIW inspectors speak directly with children and young people living in social care settings, and how this has changed over time?**

All our inspections of childcare and play services and inspections of care homes for children will include speaking to children. In 2024 – 2025 we undertook 946 inspections of childcare and play services. In each of these inspectors spoke directly with children. In the same year we delivered 201 inspections of care homes for children – again, each of these would have included speaking and listening to children.

In our inspections of local authority children’s services inspectors will have direct conversations with children where safe and appropriate. The committee will appreciate that children amid a traumatic period in their lives may not want to meet with us, or it may damage their wellbeing/ recovery for them to do so. We will always consider the circumstances for individual children through the social services records at every inspection of children’s services and engage with family members and professionals to question and

understand the experience of the child concerned. In this way we strive to understand the extent to which the child’s voice is represented and shaping the support offered to them.

CIW does not currently produce one Wales wide number for children engaged across all inspections. As described above, our engagement methods vary across our different activities, with some involving relatively large numbers of children, e.g. nurseries, and others focusing on in depth consideration of the experiences of a small number of children and young people, e.g. inspections of local authority children’s services.

**2. When CIW last inspected Gwynedd Children’s services prior to the 2025 report and the findings of that inspection.**

Inspection activity in Gwynedd occurred as follows during the period 2018 – 2025.

- Children’s Services Inspection – 01-04 May 2018 and 14-18 May 2018.
- Children’s Services Focused Activity – 17 October 2019.
- Children’s Services (also included Adults Services) COVID-19 Assurance Check – 18-22 January 2021.
- Children’s Services Child Protection Rapid Review – 27-29 March 2023.
- Children’s Services joint inspection with Estyn – 10-13 November 2025.

Type & Date of Activity	Findings
<p><b><u>Children’s Services Inspection</u></b></p> <p><b>Week 1: (x4 days) 01 May 2018 – 04 May 2018</b></p> <p><b>Week 2: (x5 days) 14 May 2018 - 18 May 2018</b></p>	<p>The inspection focused on looked after children, care leavers, safeguarding, and corporate parenting. Staff were skilled and committed, with strong multi-agency working and proper child protection procedures. However, issues were found with safety plans, care reviews, placement suitability, foster carer availability, and advocacy access. Key recommendations included improving early help, updating assessments, strengthening care planning and reviews, recruiting more foster carers, and enhancing safeguarding checks and advocacy support.</p>
<p><b><u>Children’s Services</u></b></p> <p><b>Focused Activity</b></p> <p><b>17 October 2019</b></p>	<p>The inspection found strong multi-agency working and generally positive staff feedback on support and training. Most referrals were handled appropriately and assessments were thorough. Children’s voices were heard, though consistency was needed, especially in sibling groups. Safeguarding plans were mostly in place, but some cases lacked timely responses or risk assessments. Supervision arrangements were effective but stretched. Delays in service provision and care planning were noted. CIW recommended improvements in record-keeping, contingency planning during staff absence, and timely follow-up on agreed support.</p>

<p><b><u>Children's Services</u></b> (also included Adults Services)</p> <p><b>COVID-19 Assurance Check</b></p> <p><b>18 January 2021 – 22 January 2021</b></p>	<p>The purpose of the assurance check was to review how well local authority social services continued to help and support adults and children with a focus on safety and well-being during the pandemic</p> <p><b>Children:</b> maintained contact, timely referrals, innovative models. Areas for improvement: recording, supervision, clarity in assessments, waiting lists, direct payments, individualisation in care plans.</p>
<p><b>November 2022 – National Child Protection Rapid Review Commissioned</b></p>	<p>Multi-agency rapid review of child protection decision-making across Wales, including Gwynedd.</p>
<p><b><u>Children's Services</u></b></p> <p><b>Child Protection Rapid Review</b></p> <p><b>27 March 2023 – 29 March 2023</b></p>	<p>Formal feedback post-inspection activity included the following.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong leadership and clear vision in Gwynedd's children's services.</li> <li>• Effective multi-agency working, though some delays in information sharing noted.</li> <li>• Evidence-based decisions on child protection registration but recording of progress and future risk could improve.</li> <li>• Staffing challenges impact practice quality and compliance with safeguarding procedures.</li> <li>• Inconsistent understanding of thresholds among partner agencies; joint training recommended.</li> <li>• Children's voices are considered, but opportunities for stronger participation should be developed.</li> <li>• Pay grading concerns may affect recruitment and retention.</li> <li>• Police non-attendance at review conferences seen as a missed opportunity.</li> <li>• Chairpersons' consistency and commitment are a clear strength.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Final Child Protection Review Published</b></p> <p><b>28 September 2023</b></p>	<p>Gwynedd highlighted for use of Effective Child Protection (ECP) and Risk Models.</p> <p><b>Strengths:</b> consistency, clear guidance, visual tools.</p> <p><b>Areas for improvement:</b> multi-agency engagement, communication, training, workforce capacity, child's voice.</p>

	<p><b>Recommendations:</b> adopt clear models, improve multi-agency training, strengthen communication, ensure children’s voices are central.</p>
<p><b><u>Children’s Services</u></b></p> <p><b>Joint inspection with Estyn</b></p> <p><b>10 November - 13 November 2025</b></p>	<p>CIW conducted a joint inspection with Estyn in Gwynedd local authority Children and Families’ Services and Education department.</p> <p>The purpose of the joint inspection was to review the local authority’s performance in exercising its social services duties and functions in line with legislation. CIW and Estyn sought to answer the following main question aligned under the principles of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014:</p> <p><b>How well are children protected from individuals who may pose a risk to them and when concerns arise about those who care for them or work with them, either in a paid or voluntary role?</b></p> <p><u>Strengths:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear strategic commitment to safeguarding, demonstrated by senior leaders, elected members, and strong governance with independent oversight from the Recovery Board.</li> <li>• Children’s participation is well-promoted through initiatives such as Llais Ni and youth forums across school, district, and county levels.</li> <li>• Effective multi-agency relationships, with generally strong collaboration between police, health services (BCUHB) and third-sector partners, including appropriate information sharing in many cases.</li> <li>• Examples of practice compliant with Wales Safeguarding Procedures, demonstrating adherence to national standards.</li> <li>• Schools have strong safeguarding infrastructures, with policies, designated leads, and pupil-wellbeing forums.</li> <li>• Mixed-method safeguarding training is available and monitored for compliance.</li> <li>• Social workers receive good managerial support, structured supervision and guidance for complex cases.</li> <li>• Scrutiny functions provide transparency and accountability, with committees and panels actively reviewing safeguarding arrangements.</li> </ul> <p><u>Areas for improvement:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Lack of timely acknowledgments</b> for individuals/professionals who report safeguarding concerns (not routinely within 7 working days).</li> <li>• <b>Social worker engagement with children at risk</b> needs strengthening, particularly where concerns involve individuals in positions of trust.</li> </ul>

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|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Quality Assurance systems require strengthening</b> to enable leaders to monitor data more effectively and improve frontline practice.</li><li>• <b>Weak collaboration between children's services and commissioning</b>, limiting effective planning for children's safety and well-being.</li><li>• <b>More accessible specialist training</b> is needed, particularly on grooming and emerging risks.</li><li>• <b>Inconsistent understanding across departments</b> regarding the role of the Education Safeguarding &amp; Well-being Team.</li><li>• <b>Multi-agency strategy discussions require improvement</b>, particularly in consistency and quality.</li><li>• <b>Corporate safeguarding coherence needs strengthening</b>, with clearer policies, procedures, and cross-Council strategies, including a shared approach to the voice of the child.</li></ul> |
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We appreciate the opportunity to give evidence to demonstrate our commitment to improving outcomes for children and young people in Wales. We look forward to future engagement in respect of our 2025/26 annual report.

Yours sincerely



Gillian Baranski  
**Chief Inspector**  
Care Inspectorate Wales