
CARE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 13/01/26

Present:

Councillors: Elwyn Jones, Menna Baines, Anwen J. Davies, Eryl Jones-Williams, Beth Lawton, Rheinallt Puw, Angela Russell, Linda Morgan, Gwynfor Owen, Meryl Roberts, Einir Wyn Williams, Sian Williams, Berwyn Parry Jones, Elin Walker Jones and Geraint Wyn Parry

Officers present:

Llywela Haf Owain (Senior Language and Scrutiny Advisor), Courtney Leigh Jones (Democracy and Civic Services Officer).

Present for item 4:

Councillor Nia Jeffreys (Council Leader), Menna Trenholme (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children and Supporting Families), Dewi Jones (Cabinet Member for Education), Dafydd Gibbard (Chief Executive), Dylan Owen (Corporate Director), Ffion Mai Jones (Senior Executive Officer), Gwern ap Rhisiart (Head of Education Department), Alison Halliday (Assistant Head - Schools Support), Aled Gibbard (Acting Head of Children's Services), Catrin Love (Assistant Head of Corporate Services), Ian Jones (Head of Corporate Services Department)

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor Jina Gwyrfa.

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

A declaration of interest was received from Councillor Elin Walker Jones. This was not a prejudicial interest and therefore she did not withdraw from the meeting.

3. URGENT BUSINESS

None to note.

4. RESPONSE PLAN TO THE OUR BRAVERY BROUGHT JUSTICE REPORT

The report was submitted by the Council Leader, who thanked the members of the committee for the opportunity to bring the Response Plan to the Our Bravery Brought Justice Report to scrutiny, before it was formally adopted by the Cabinet. She apologised again to all victims affected by the heinous crimes of Neil Foden, she acknowledged that the Council had failed, and that the voices of the children

had not been heard. She emphasised the Council's commitment to act and ensure that things changed. She said that the Council prioritised the vow to learn and change, to ensure that such failures would never happen again. It was highlighted that the Response Plan was a step on a long journey ahead to restore the confidence of the public, residents and staff, and it was noted that transparency was critical to this end. It was noted that the Response Plan was a live and public document. She noted that the minutes of the programme board meetings were also public, therefore it would be possible to monitor the progress that was happening. It was acknowledged that this was not an easy matter to discuss, and she acknowledged that the report's findings were atrocious. She thanked members for their preparedness to scrutinise this difficult subject, and for contributing to the improvement of child safeguarding procedures, in order to ensure that this would never happen again here in Gwynedd. She extended her gratitude to Professor Sally Holland, Chair of the Response Plan Programme Board, for her remarkable leadership.

She noted that progress could be seen in many sections of the Plan, and it was noted that this was an example of cross-departmental collaboration to reach the same goal; i.e., improve the safeguarding arrangements in Gwynedd. It was expressed that the Council acknowledged that protecting and safeguarding children from harm was a responsibility for all, and comments, suggestions and any criticism from members were welcomed, in order to build on and improve the Plan and to ensure that the Council provided a comprehensive and thorough response. The importance of having member input into strengthening the Response Plan and to help draw up a safer future for the children and young people of the county, was emphasised.

The Chief Executive elaborated on the Response Plan. It was noted that the first Response Plan had been published over a year ago, way before the publication of the child practice review. It was noted that there had been many attainments during this period, noting that approximately 42 to 43 various work tasks had been achieved over the past year, in an attempt to address what the Council was facing. It was explained that there had been acknowledgement from the outset that there would be a need to revisit the Response Plan following the publication of the Child Practice Review, in order to act on the appropriate recommendations.

Reference was made to Appendix 2 which included reports that provided an overview of the work of responding to the review, summarising what had changed and highlighting the important things that were in the pipeline. Members' attention was drawn to appendix 3, which included the content of the live work programme in progress by the Council to monitor the progress happening in every department in response to the recommendations. The work programme was detailed, noting that it included every recommendation in the Child Practice Review, and further recommendations and work streams that had been added in order to deliver. It was noted that there were 27 recommendations in the Child Practice Review, and that there were 74 work streams in the Response Plan. It was noted that definitive timetables had been included, in order to monitor the work thoroughly and ensure attainment.

It was noted that the Plan had already been challenged by several experts and agencies, including the Children's Commissioner, Wales Safeguarding Board, Welsh Government, ESTYN, the Care Inspectorate and several other bodies. It

was explained that this had been beneficial, with the regular challenging and monitoring of the Plan and ensuring that they built the best possible Plan. It was explained that the Response Plan was being scrutinised by members at this Committee, as well as the Governance and Audit Plan, Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee and the Full Council, before being formally adopted by the Cabinet.

The members were guided through the report. Reference was made to the Plan which had been structured per work stream, noting the designated officer who was responsible for ensuring attainment and success in the field. The discussion was held per work stream, in order to respond to every theme appropriately and comprehensively.

Work Stream 1 - Voice of the Child and Supporting Victims

It was noted that the Head of Education Department led this stream, which ensured that the voice of the child was central in matters relating to children, and that this was embedded through all activities. It was noted that the stream ensured that children were listened to and were believed and taken seriously, by giving children and young people a voice in processes that had been planned to keep them safe. It was highlighted that this stream ensured that the Council supported the victims and survivors and establishing a caring relationship with them.

By referring to point 1.4, which detailed the Personal Support Plan, it was acknowledged that not all victims in the case had accepted the support offered to them at the time. It was asked whether there was an opportunity for them to accept this support in the future, and whether the door remained open for them to obtain support from the Council, should they need support in years to come? It was asked whether the victims were aware of where to obtain this support and whether there were clear instructions for them.

In response to the question, it was confirmed that the Council acknowledged that the trauma caused to victims was permanent, and that they welcomed victims to come forward to receive support at any time. It was confirmed that regular meetings were conducted with the probation service, IDVA, ISFA to offer a regular service for victims. It was elaborated that the Council also worked closely with RASA to ensure that more support was available. Furthermore, it was noted that the Council had commissioned more services to prioritise the support when needed.

By referring to point 1.8 in this stream, the fact that an external member of the governing body was being highlighted to provide support for children in school, was welcomed. The importance of ensuring that an external officer was available for children to contact, if they were concerned, was emphasised, and to ensure that this provision was clear for children in schools.

It was confirmed that the Lead Safeguarding and Welfare Quality Officer was the designated officer who acted as a point of contact for children if they had concerns. It was suggested it should be ensured that a female designated officer was also available as a point of contact for children, and that her contact details should also be included on the series of posters. It was expressed that there was

a desire to see these contact details on every school website and on the Council's website, so that people from outside the schools could also contact the external person.

Assurances were given that the Council encouraged schools to display contact details in a visible, clear place, so that children could access the information in their own time. It was explained that the information was available in toilets, and that developments were in place to ensure that this was more accessible. Assurances were given that staff communicated regularly with the children by asking them whether they knew who to contact, if they had any concerns. It was elaborated that the Voice of the Child was key to the Recovery Plan, therefore the Council and schools made every effort to ensure that they assisted with the recovery process.

It was ensured that an Audit was being carried out in the children's department to monitor the processes, and it was confirmed that firm changes had been implemented. It was explained that every part 5 referral had been reviewed by the Council to discover some cases that raised concerns, in an attempt to tighten systems. It was explained that the Council no longer made decisions on safety matters as a sole agency. It was elaborated that the Council would now deal with safeguarding matters by working very closely with different agencies, such as the Health Board and the Police, and would hold regular meetings to make decisions and to monitor the progress of the case.

Reference was made to the work progressing in the Education Department with the development of the Youth Forum. It was explained that the Forum provided a platform and power to young people between 13-21 to discuss matters and influence policies affecting young people in Gwynedd. It was noted that the forums acted on an area level at present and was in the process of developing into a county forum, with complete membership across the county. It was hoped that the Forum would be able to evolve into a Youth Council in the future. It was explained that a specific Officer had been commissioned to develop the forums in the long-term. In response to an enquiry, it was ensured that representation from young people across the county was a part of the Forum, and that there was a firm structure to it. It was noted that there was an intention to elaborate on the engagement to include looked-after children, organisations such as Derwen, in order to ensure that the voices of various children were included. It was elaborated that this was key to the Council's priorities in being a Child Friendly County. It was acknowledged that children were often more comfortable sharing concerns with other children, so it was hoped that the Forum provided an additional way for them to share and raise any concerns.

A desire to scrutinise the Whistleblowing Policy was expressed. It was noted that substantial work had been done to review and reinforce the Policy, and associated training arrangements. It was confirmed that an amended version of the policy was being discussed by the Cabinet next week. A training and awareness raising programme would follow, before implementing and monitoring the new policy. It was explained that a Policy for Council staff was in question here, and it was explained that a different policy applied to schools. It was ensured that all Gwynedd schools would adopt the policy. In response to an enquiry, it was confirmed that there was a different policy for Council members, and the Corporate Services Department would raise awareness of this with the members. It was highlighted that an appendix had been included, outlining

different methods of raising different types of concerns within this, and summarised the information in a single document.

It was asked how the Recovery Plan considered ensuring that the voice of the family was given thorough attention and acknowledgement, as well as the voice of the child. A desire to see a framework in place to listen to the voice of the child was expressed, as well as ensuring that the family were involved in the safeguarding processes when appropriate. In response, it was ensured that it was possible to draw clearer attention to this in the Response Plan, in order to show clearly that the voice of the family was an integral part of the work. This was seen to be an important part of the culture change in the Council and at grass roots level, which would be a tribute to the victims.

Work Stream 2 - Managing allegations and concerns about adults working with children

It was noted that the Corporate Director was responsible for this stream, which ensured that the Council's safeguarding arrangements were robust and of the best possible standard. It was emphasised that child protection was at the root of the stream, by ensuring that concerns could be taken seriously and implemented swiftly. It was noted that it ensured that Part 5 arrangements supported a consistent and firm multi-agency response to allegations and concerns about adults who worked with children.

Reference was made to point 2.2 of the Plan, which noted that the Lead Safeguarding Officer in the Education Department had held Monitoring the Safeguarding Arrangements in Gwynedd, since April 2023.

By referring to point 2.9 in the Plan, which details the Section 47 and Part 5 enquiries of the Wales safeguarding procedures, it was asked whether the recommendations had been implemented and how the developments were evolving. In response, it was confirmed that this had been implemented in part, and that other developments were in progress.

It was confirmed that the Council had introduced measures to ensure that decisions on referrals did not fall on individuals and that the Council would pilot new processes for referrals relating to people in positions of trust. It was explained that the Council had been collaborating with the Police to consider the practicality of the resources that were needed to act on this. It was noted that a vast number of referrals were submitted every year. It was elaborated that changes had already been introduced to Part 5 discussion arrangements so that all information on children's records were reviewed when they were risk-assessed. References were made to the amendments made to the referral forms, and it was explained that a Safeguarding Officer had been commissioned by the Council to carry out the work and ensure an arrangement for multi-agency conversations.

Reference was made to the number of failures that had occurred in the case of Ysgol Friars, and enquiries were made about who was responsible to decide whether or not the concern reached the safeguarding or child protection threshold. It was acknowledged that there was a need to strengthen and

standardise the process of reporting on low-level concerns, across the services. It was explained that the Council ensured that records were kept of any member of staff who had been the subject of concern under Part 5, and a flagging system would ensure that the concerns were identified and considered. It was reiterated that there was more to do, such as formalise meetings with the Police. It was explained that discussions were progressing with the Welsh Government officers to develop policies and national implementation on this.

Members expressed a desire for Estyn to conduct unannounced visits to schools, so as to assess the schools' ability based on a valid visit.

A Member referred to a positive quotation from Estyn in the report, which praised the quality of part 5 action prior to Foden's arrest. It was suggested that it was not appropriate to include it, considering the context and that the text should be amended. It was reiterated that this was an example of a defensive culture and that the Council needed to move to remove the defensive culture when carrying out the implementation of recommendations in the Review to ensure that there was an actual change in culture in all aspects. It was ensured that this was a Council priority and a genuine commitment. It was acknowledged that this would take time to alter over the years to come as new policies were adopted.

Work Stream 3 - Training and Policies

It was confirmed that the Head of Corporate Services Department was responsible for this stream, ensuring that training packs were appropriate and that staff had received training that was suitable for their role. It was noted that the aim of this stream was to ensure that the county's schools adopted and implemented policies and ensured that staff were trained "to think the unthinkable" and understand that "it could happen here".

It was highlighted that the Council was committed to encourage staff to "think the unthinkable" and understand that it could happen here. It was believed that staff should be trained and to tackle the mindset where individuals tended to put people in 'respectable' jobs on a pedestal. It was noted that substantial progress had been made to promote and raise awareness of the safeguarding duties of Council staff. It was noted that an officer had been appointed as a Safeguarding Promoter and that work was progressing to encourage staff across the Council to complete safeguarding training. It was noted that amended training packs had been provided to all staff, which included amended information on child protection, safeguarding and abuse. It was confirmed that the arrangements were supervised by the strategy panel.

A desire to see more external training being offered to staff and members was expressed. It was ensured that this would be possible and that it was possible to conduct external training with external experts. In response to an enquiry, it was confirmed that this training could also be offered to School Governors. It was ensured that the training already being provided was standard training that had been designated by Cymru Care. Praise was expressed on the training that was already being provided in-house in the Council. It was reiterated that the training modules being provided to members covered a broad range of worthwhile issues.

It was acknowledged that the staff of the Children's Department had suffered huge pressure at work due to what had happened. Consideration was given to the substantial challenges facing them and the impact this had on frontline staff.

Enquiries were made about how the hard work seen on the ground was being reflected in appreciation and support. In response, it was confirmed that support was being given to staff regularly and staff were thanked for their commitment and professionalism throughout. A special tribute was paid to the staff of Ysgol Friars, and it was acknowledged that it had been very difficult for them to continue to provide a service. It was ensured that systems were in place to confirm that staff were able to cope with the pressure and challenges, and reference was made to the provision available by the Safeguarding and Well-being Team. It was noted that the Team's additional capacity would provide better support for the schools.

It was enquired whether it would be possible for all Council staff, Council members, school Governors and pupils to receive training on grooming. In response, assurances were given that the Council had been working on a cross-departmental project to create a training pack to address grooming behaviour and for this to be shared with the appropriate stakeholders. It was noted that they were working quickly to a tight timetable in order to provide promptly and timely and the Council would be adopting the Welsh Government's training when it would come in due course. Assurances were given that regular and ongoing discussions were progressing between the Council and Welsh Government to achieve the national recommendations. Reference was made to the Assurance Board which had been established, and it was noted that the Council took guidance from the Government and reported on the progress on the commitment to turn every stone and act.

The Council was trauma-informed. The opportunity to discuss how the Council had been designated as a Trauma-informed Council was welcomed.

Work Stream 4 - School Governance

It was noted that the Reporting Officer was to be confirmed for this stream. It was noted that the priority of this stream was to provide school Governors the best possible support to equip them to step-up in their roles. Assurances were given that governing bodies understood their roles and responsibilities to keep children safe and that there were systems in place which measured the broader culture of schools.

A desire to establish and provide training to improve the culture in the Education Department to promote collaboration between the Education Department and Governors and School Staff, was expressed. Consideration was given to providing training to define and explain the role and responsibilities of each entity clearly and provide guidance and leadership to governing bodies. It was acknowledged that there was a lot of work to do to provide support to Governors and assurances were given that work was progressing under the guidance of the Welsh Government. It was reiterated that the Council supported the work and made a substantial contribution to ensure clarity. The Council's commitment to excel in the field, moving forward, was reiterated.

It was acknowledged that a School Governor's job was not attractive and not always easy. Gratitude was expressed to School Governors across the County and Wales for their commitment as volunteers to work for their community. Consideration was given to whether these volunteers were placed under too

much pressure, and it was noted that there was a need to look at the model and relationship between the Governing Body and the wider agencies. A desire to call on the Government to act on this was expressed. It was emphasised that the culture change was essential to effective Governance and this could be implemented directly through the Council. The work progressing to ensure support to Governors was appreciated. Assurances were given that the Department would give members regular updates on the progress happening in a structured manner, such as through the members' bulletin.

Concern was expressed that the number of staff within the education department had been reduced and that they were expected to take more on. It was acknowledged that the role of a school governor was not easy and that it needed to be simplified in order to make the job easier. It was noted that it was essential to ensure that Local Government had the resources it needed to provide robust support to schools and it was noted that the guidance was clear in the Response Plan to be implemented by the Council. Members were reminded that the work of a School Governor could also be a rewarding role, with much satisfaction, as members had the chance to work for their residents and children in their community. A suggestion was made that the Council should correspond with the Welsh Government to express concern about the challenges and risks surrounding the role of school governors.

The direct support available for Governors in Gwynedd was detailed. An overview of the support already being provided was given, and it was noted that they were working on a model agenda for meetings. Confirmation was received that a handbook for governors had been distributed this year, detailing the role and providing information on the support available to governors. An explanation was given that a mandatory training programme was available for governors and that it was operational across the county and that ongoing advice and support was available for governing bodies through the Assistant Education Support Officer. It was highlighted that there was support and guidance for clerks to governors and stabilised arrangements at Ysgol Friars.

Work Stream 5 - Reasonable Force

It was noted that the Reporting Officer was to be confirmed for this stream. It was noted that the priority in this stream was to ensure that all schools did everything to ensure that all schools implemented practices on the use of reasonable force in an appropriate manner. It was noted that the reasonable force policy of individual schools was being checked during quality visits by the Safeguarding Team and that training was being provided to Schools by the inclusion service. It was confirmed that an additional Safeguarding and Well-being Officer had been appointed to the Team recently in order to be able to complete the annual quality visits. Assurances were given that the authority would continue to review the content of the policy to reflect what the Government would publish and would communicate any relevant change to the schools and governing bodies.

Work Stream 6 - Crisis Planning and Crisis Response

It was highlighted that the Assistant Head of Corporate Services would lead on this work stream. It was elaborated that the aim was to ensure that the

arrangements for planning and responding to an emergency were appropriate and that all staff were aware of how to respond in a situation of safeguarding crisis. It was noted that it supported school staff to respond to the challenging situation to raise a complaint against the leadership, if needed.

Work Stream 7 - Supporting and stabilising Ysgol Friars

It was noted that the priority in this stream was to ensure that the current education standards continued to be maintained, that staff were confident and that the leadership of the school's Governing Body was stable and effective. It was explained that much had changed at Ysgol Friars over the past two years, and that the Council acted to support the staff, governors and acting headteacher.

A Member asked whether children were happy at Ysgol Friars. In response, it was acknowledged that this was a difficult question to answer and that the school had gone through a hellish time. Nevertheless, assurances were given that the Council had faith in the current senior management team at Friars and they visited the school regularly to monitor the progress. It was emphasised that the relationship of staff with children at the school was essential to ensure that it was a healthy, thriving and positive environment. It was confirmed that good work was progressing to promote well-being and inclusion at the school and assurances were given that there were developments in the fields of trauma-awareness at the school. It was believed that this gave confidence that the school prioritised the welfare of children and it was hoped that the children felt pride that they were able to express any concerns to staff if necessary.

It was hoped that the school was starting to move on from what had happened through the support of the Council, and that lessons had been learnt. It was expressed that the school should be praised for being able to cope and continuing to succeed. Pride was expressed that it was a successful school and it was noted that there had been a positive change to build and promote a new, positive and safe culture at the school. It was explained that the school's management team and governing body had changed, and that the team continued to build on the progress and culture change. It was noted that the post of permanent headteacher had been advertised and that an individual had been appointed. The appointment was praised and it was noted that the person was a person of calibre who would continue to profess the principles seen at the school. Gratitude was expressed for all the excellent co-working which supported the school and ensured that it went from strength to strength and entered a new and exciting chapter in the school's history. It was acknowledged that holding public meetings to scrutinise the matter re-ignited a lot of stress for the Ysgol Friars community. There was a wish to note this, sympathise with them and thank them for continuing to succeed. Praise was expressed for the work that was going on at the school to create new plans.

The importance of welfare and inclusion for children at the school was emphasised and priority was given to reflecting this in the Response Plan. A member asked whether the word 'well-being' could be added in the description of the purpose of this stream (7), in order to refine the purpose of the stream and to draw attention to the importance of the pupils' health and well-being.

It was asked whether there was full capacity on the board of governors at Ysgol Friars. In response, it was confirmed that several new members had joined the body a year ago. It was acknowledged that the governing body was in its early days, and that it would develop over the coming period to realise the School's vision. It was explained that there were several exciting things in the pipeline. It was acknowledged that there were a few empty seats on the board, and it was explained that it was challenging to fill every seat. It was elaborated that this was an ongoing battle and the hope was that the situation would improve soon. It was enquired whether it would be possible for Council members to be informed of the number of governors' empty seats at the County's schools. In response, it was confirmed that clerks could highlight the number of empty seats in every governing body, per school. It was confirmed that the education department would be happy to share this information in due course.

It was asked whether the members of the Committee could receive an update on the progress at the next meeting of the Care Scrutiny Committee in March. It was proposed that regular updates should be received on the progress every 6 months, in order to be able to fully monitor the situation.

DECISION

1) To note the work programme

2) To request a progress report in 6 months on the work programme including information on the whistleblowing policy and its implementation

3) To request a report on securing a Child Friendly County status and becoming a Trauma-Informed Council

4) To ask Cabinet to consider

- **adding an external female contact name to the poster to share information about concerns and ensure contact details are available on school websites and the Council website**
- **addressing the voice of the family as well as the voice of the child in work stream 1**
- **amending the text under the heading '2.3 – Estyn inspection of the Council's Education Department' on page 18 of the Response Plan to include a sentence reflecting the context that, despite the commendation by Estyn, a school head was arrested a few months later**
- **ensuring that grooming training is available to all who need it**
- **providing external specialist safeguarding training for members and governors**
- **adding the "well-being of children and young people" to the description of work stream 7 - Supporting and Stabilising Ysgol**

Friars

- **corresponding with Welsh Government to express concern about the challenges and risks surrounding the role of school governors**

The meeting commenced at 10.30 am and concluded at 1.00 pm

CHAIRMAN