

ITEM 6 - QUESTIONS

Questions by Elected Members

(1) Question by Councillor John Pughe Roberts

Given the statutory obligations under the Education Act 2002 (s.175) and Keeping Learners Safe (Welsh Government, 2021), governing bodies must ensure effective safeguarding arrangements, provide robust challenge, and verify that procedures are followed. The Child Practice Review identified significant shortcomings, including:

- inadequate challenge and oversight from governors;
- over-reliance on assurances from senior leaders rather than verification;
- insufficient safeguarding training;
- unclear or delayed communication with the LADO and Local Authority.

In the interests of transparency, accountability and public confidence, I ask the Leader to confirm that no individual connected to these failures is currently serving in her Cabinet?

Response – The Leader, Councillor Nia Jeffreys

One of the Cabinet Members serves as a governor at Ysgol Friars, and I know that the member wishes to apologise to the victims for the far-reaching impact of the Governing Body's failures, which have been highlighted in the *Our Bravery Brought Justice* report. As a Cabinet and Council, we fully accept the report. Our responsibility now is to act on all its recommendations and findings. The courage of the victims compels us to act swiftly and decisively.

Members will also be aware that we are currently drafting a new version of our Response Plan, and all recommendations from *Our Bravery Brought Justice* relating to school governance will receive detailed attention as part of that work. In addition, I am pleased to hear that the Welsh Government has announced a review of the School Governance system, and as a Council we are very keen to play every possible part in that process.

We will need to look at the Council's governance arrangements, and I will commission the Chief Executive to work with an external body such as the WLGA. We would welcome cross-party collaboration on the terms of reference for this work.

(2) Question by Councillor Angela Russell

In light of the publication of the Child Practice Review, 'Our Bravery Brought Justice', and the identification of over fifty missed opportunities to safeguard the children, what specific lessons have been learned, and what assurances can be provided that such systemic failures will not recur? It is of particular concern that many of these lessons should have been embedded following the Waterhouse Inquiry.

Response – The Leader, Councillor Nia Jeffreys

Thank you for this extremely important and timely question, in our First Full Council meeting since the publication of '*Our Bravery Brought Justice*' exactly a month ago today

– a report which clearly highlights the Council’s failures. I wish to acknowledge the courage of the victims and survivors; it is their bravery that drives me to act. Of course, we fully accept the findings of the review and recognise all the missed opportunities. These failures should never have happened. As Leader of the Council, I apologise to the victims and to everyone affected by these crimes.

Work to recover and respond to these events is underway to improve and strengthen the Council’s arrangements. A Response Board has been established to provide scrutiny and challenge, and I am extremely grateful to the Independent Chair, Professor Sally Holland, for her consistent challenge and leadership.

I also wish to thank the many other agencies who act as observers on the Board – the Welsh Government, the Children’s Commissioner, Estyn, Care Inspectorate Wales, and the Regional Safeguarding Board. Their contribution is invaluable.

Along with my Cabinet colleagues, I am also a member of the Board to ensure that progress is being made and to provide challenge, support, and resources to deliver.

Since the publication of the *Our Bravery Brought Justice* report, a new Response Plan is being developed. Every recommendation is being addressed in the action plan under seven themes, aligned with the themes of the report. Work has begun, but there is much more to do.

An Assurance Group has been established by Welsh Ministers, and in November, Care Inspectorate Wales and Estyn conducted a joint review, examining safeguarding arrangements, the voice of the child, how we collaborate with other agencies such as the police, and governance, training, and staff support across the Children and Education Departments.

In my view, the more eyes on this work, the better. The new Response Plan will be presented to the Governance and Audit Committee, as well as to the Care Scrutiny Committee and the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee early in the new year, giving Councillors the opportunity to provide their valuable input.

It is a national shame that the recommendations of the Waterhouse report published in 2000, and the Clywch report in 2004, have not been implemented in full. This Council will work tirelessly and relentlessly to ensure that the recommendations and findings of *Our Bravery Brought Justice* are fully delivered, without excuses. I will not shy away from my responsibility as Leader; my priority is to restore trust and to do everything within our power to protect the children of Gwynedd. Nothing is more important to me, and to everyone in our county, than the safety of our children.

Here are examples of some actions that have taken place or are underway over time – these are only small samples, as there are over 200 actions within the detailed work programme behind the Response Plan:

What has already happened?	• An audit has been carried out of cases where there is more than one referral concerning individuals in positions of trust • Increased frequency of safeguarding quality visits to schools. • ‘Grooming’ has been added to the safeguarding training pack for schools.
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	• Appointment of a new Safeguarding Champion to promote and raise awareness of safeguarding training across the Council. • A social worker visits every child involved in a referral and listens to them.
What will be achieved in the next few months?	• Training for staff to identify and record changes in children's behaviour that may indicate 'grooming' or abuse. • Development of a Voice of the Child Policy, with the next step being its formal adoption. • Increasing resources (staff) within the Education Safeguarding and Well-being Team. • Formal adoption of a new "Whistleblowing" policy.
What will happen in the next 3-12 months	• Roll-out of a new system for schools to report concerns. • Implementation of any national changes during this period. • A training programme embedded to ensure that Cyngor Gwynedd is a 'Trauma-Informed' organisation • Cyngor Gwynedd working towards a 'Child-Friendly County' status

(3) Question by Councillor Louise Hughes

Remembrance Sunday is a national day of solemn reflection, honouring those who Served and paid the ultimate sacrifice for the Freedoms we enjoy today, it is a debt we can never repay. Will this council declare free parking on Remembrance Sunday in Gwynedd Council car parks for those wishing to pay their respects, in line with other Local Authorities?

Response – Cabinet Member for the Environment, Councillor Craig ab Iago

Cyngor Gwynedd fully recognises the significance and solemnity of Remembrance Sunday.

I would welcome a discussion with Cllr. Louise Hughes and the relevant officers to consider this request further.

This would include from the perspective of how such an arrangement could be practicably implemented and the considerations and implications related to that.

(4) Question by Councillor Rhys Tudur

Given that:

- Councillors on the scrutiny committees and other committees in the Council offer constructive and valuable comments on the items discussed.
- Findings and comments are formally minuted with a view to bringing them to the attention of Cabinet and Officers in full.
- Too often when those items come before Cabinet all that is noted on the Cabinet agenda is a few short sentences or no comment at all by councillors, e.g. on matters such as
 - Staff well-being report
 - Toilet Strategy

- Housing Action Plan
- Planning Policy Committee items.

Does this not show a lack of respect for the views/impressions of Councillors and ignores the voice of those members who are not Cabinet Members?

Response – Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, Councillor Llio Elenid Owen

Thank you for the comments and the question.

The submission of any report for a Cabinet decision requires thorough information. Cabinet must take into account a number of factors when making all decisions (e.g. the Well-being of Future Generations Act, equality, the Welsh language, socio-economic impact etc.) as well as the comments of any consultation e.g. with a scrutiny committee or the public.

Where a committee or working group has considered a matter before it is submitted for a decision to Cabinet, information is expected to be included in the report. Rigorous guidelines and a specific template have been created for reporting to Cabinet, which articulate the above clearly.

It is pleasing to see your positive comments about scrutiny, and I am aware that considerable work has been done by the Scrutiny Committees to refine the recommendations submitted to Cabinet Members. It is important to remember that it is the comments of the committee, and not individuals, that are submitted.

In addition, work has taken place to develop a procedure whereby the Chair of the Scrutiny Committee receives an invitation to attend a Cabinet meeting when an item has been scrutinised in advance to elaborate on the discussion and grounds for the committee's decision. This development is still in its early days, but I am confident that it is a positive step in order to ensure the input of the scrutiny committees.

I acknowledge that there are inconsistencies in the content of reports to Cabinet at the moment, there are good examples of referring to the work of the scrutiny members and/or members of the Planning Policy Working Group in Cabinet reports, and poor examples too. There is scope for us as Cabinet Members to look at improving this in the future.

It is certainly not intended to ignore the voice of members who are not Cabinet members or to disrespect the views and impressions of the relevant committees or working groups.

(5) Question by Councillor Elin Walker Jones

As we have just marked White Ribbon Day, and with violence against women continuing to be a national crisis, what progress has Cyngor Gwynedd made to become a trauma-informed authority?

Response - Cabinet Member for Children and Supporting Families, Councillor Menna Trenholme

Thank you for the question. The Council has already been a White Ribbon accredited organisation since 2022. This year, once again, the Council has been part of that campaign to eradicate violence against girls and women. This year's campaign focused on the theme of encouraging men and boys to raise their voices against violence against girls and women. I thank my colleague, Councillor Llio Elenid Owen, for leading on that campaign.

Beyond White Ribbon Day and in the context of the ongoing national crisis in relation to violence against girls and women, it is vital that we do everything we can as a Council to work in a way that protects and respects the experiences of those living with trauma. Becoming a trauma-informed authority is part of that.

Although we are only at the beginning of the journey as a Council, important work is already underway. Mapping work has recently been carried out across all departments to understand the current situation. The responses show that there is an interest and recognition of the need to develop a trauma-informed approach, and identify clear gaps, particularly in terms of staff confidence and understanding of trauma, and consistency of training in the field.

Nevertheless, we have strong foundations to build on. Excellent work is already taking place in services that work closely with people experiencing trauma such as the homelessness services, refugee support and some teams within adult and children's services. Gwynedd's education sector is also in a good position with over 1,000 school staff having received trauma-informed training at an all-staff level, and almost half of the county's schools now have staff who have completed specialist Diploma training.

As a member of the Gwynedd and Anglesey Public Services Board, I am pleased to note that the Board has identified trauma-informed practice as a key priority. This collaboration offers us a real opportunity to learn from our partners' experiences, share good practices, and collaborate and coordinate the next steps.

As a result of the recent mapping, it is clear that we need to support our staff to acquire the understanding, skills and confidence to be trauma-informed, across council departments. We therefore intend to develop a pack, supported by the Public Services Board, with a basic presentation for members and frontline workers, training for managers, and specialist training for frontline teams working with people who have experienced trauma. We want to develop a support and learning pack that will ensure a consistent approach across the organisation and reduce the need for departments to commission training individually.

We are also exploring formal accreditation options that could strengthen and support our commitment as an organisation. However, we are clear that what is most important is to foster a real trauma-informed culture in our day-to-day work, and not just secure a badge or label.

(6) Question by Councillor Beca Roberts

Can the Cabinet Member confirm how much funding has been generated through Section 106 agreements since May 2022, and how much of that total remains uncommitted or unallocated?

Response – Cabinet Member for the Environment, Councillor Craig ab Iago

Since May 2022, £348,516 in total has been received by the Council as financial contributions through agreements completed in accordance with the provisions of Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended).

A Section 106 agreement (S106) is a legally binding contract between a developer (or a number of interested parties) and a Local Planning Authority (LPA) that operates alongside a statutory planning permission. Such agreements require developers to carry out specified planning obligations when implementing planning permissions.

Therefore, all of the financial contributions received have been committed, as these types of agreements specifically state and allocate how the money has to be spent.

Contributions like these can be used for addressing needs such as education, road improvements, provision of play facilities in order to overcome impacts of a development on an area.

There are legal requirements that relate to the use of Section 106 Agreements, and they can only be used if they meet the statutory tests. Any planning obligation must be:

1. necessary to make the development acceptable in planning terms;
2. directly related to the development; and
3. fairly and reasonably related in scale and kind.

It can be confirmed therefore that all the money has been committed or allocated.

(7) Question by Councillor Gruffydd Williams

Following the fact that article 4 has been quashed by Judge Justice Eyre and as a result of what he said, "that there has been significant misleading by the Officers of this Council", will the Council apologise to campaigners who have fought so hard to enforce article 4?

Response – Cabinet Member for the Environment, Councillor Craig ab Iago

As a Council, we have been determined to do everything in our power to ensure that the people of Gwynedd have access to suitable homes in their communities. That is why we have taken a series of proactive steps - including introducing the Article 4 Direction - to manage the significant number of homes that are being lost, as they are converted into second homes or short-term holiday lets.

Research carried out before introducing the Article 4 Direction showed that 65% of Gwynedd households were being priced out of the housing market, with the problem even more acute in communities where there is a high proportion of holiday homes.

As the Member will be aware, this Council has led the way in this area and was the first Planning Authority in Wales to introduce an Article 4 Direction as a means of controlling

the use of housing such as second homes and holiday accommodation. I'm proud that we are willing to innovate and do everything we can to ensure that the people of Gwynedd have access to suitable homes in their communities, I certainly won't apologise for that.

Of course, we are extremely disappointed with the Judge's decision to reject our verbal request for permission to appeal the judgement, and that Article 4 is quashed in the Gwynedd Local Planning Authority area. We will now be pressing ahead with a written appeal to protect the Council's decision to introduce Article 4 in Gwynedd

This request will be submitted shortly. As we intend to appeal the decision, the related legal process is ongoing, and the legal case remains live. It would not be appropriate for me to comment further on the case at this point.

(8) Question by Councillor Delyth Lloyd Griffiths

The Council owns 39 smallholdings, several of which are in my ward of Rhydymain. I have had many constituents contact me during this year. The dwelling houses and also farm buildings require considerable maintenance work.

I understand that the Council has appointed a private professional company to assess the work that needs to be carried out.

I would like to know from the Cabinet Member what the timetable of the work programme is for spending the money earmarked by Cabinet for making significant improvements to the dwellings and also the farm buildings?

Response – Cabinet Member for Housing and Property, Councillor Paul Rowlinson

I would like to start by highlighting that the money earmarked towards addressing improvements to the Smallholdings Estate has been specifically allocated for upgrading housing standards, as part of the Council's Housing Action Plan. Any maintenance elements relating to the farm buildings will be subject to further discussions between Council officers and tenants, varying according to the content of the tenancies.

The task of assessing the Work Programme to be undertaken as part of this financial investment was undertaken by internal officers, with the content of the programme based on the outcomes of internal condition surveys. No private company has been involved in the task of assessing the work to be carried out.

In terms of a timeframe for undertaking the Work Programme, it is intended to start the first phase of the Programme in the new year, with the Programme as a whole set over a two-year period.

All tenants have been informed of the financial commitment made as part of the Housing Action Plan, and further correspondence has been sent to those tenants who will have work undertaken on their holdings as part of the first phase of the programme.

Should any tenant have specific concerns, I would encourage them to contact the relevant officers in the Council as usual.