MEETING	Care Scrutiny Committee
DATE	5th November 2026
TITLE	Performance Report of the Cabinet Member for Children and Supporting Families
REASON TO SCRUTINISE	For Committee Members to scrutinise performance matters within the Department.
AUTHOR	Sharron Williams Carter, Head of Children and Supporting Families Department
CABINET MEMBER	Councillor Menna Trenholme

1. Why it needs scrutiny?

For Committee Members to scrutinise performance matters within the Department.

2. Background / Context

2.1 Background / Introduction

The purpose of this report is to update you on what has been achieved in the area for which I am responsible as the Cabinet Member for Children and Supporting Families. This includes outlining the latest regarding the pledges in the Council Plan; the Department's day-to-day work; as well as the latest in terms of the savings scheme and cuts.

We are implementing the Council Plan for 2023-28, and here I report on the progress made up to the end of September 2026, for an autism plan and residential provision for looked after children in small group homes. All matters have been the subject of discussion and have been challenged by me at a performance challenge meeting, and I am satisfied with the performance of the Department.

2.2 Rationale and justification

Performance of Projects in the Council Plan

The Children and Supporting Families Department has two projects in the Council Plan, namely the Autism Plan and a Plan for developing a residential provision for looked after children in small group homes.

<u>Autism Plan</u>

The Gwynedd Autism Plan continues to develop and respond to increasing demand for help and support from autistic individuals, neuro-divergent people and their families. The needs and complexities of autistic individuals and their families are difficult to analyse, especially if there is a cross-section of needs such as trauma, poverty, neuro-divergent parents, Looked After Children, Child protection cases, etc. Therefore, the need for social

workers to be able to consult, discuss cases and seek the direct input of a key worker, who specialises in the field, is proving to be successful in several of cases, and this has contributed towards reducing the level of statutory intervention in several cases, including moving from Child Protection Plans to Care and Support Plans, where appropriate, and several cases were closed following intervention. There is now a short waiting list for direct support from a key worker.

The team is leading on developing and implementing Neuro-developmental Profiling, supporting consistent implementation of this approach across health, education and social care. A multi-agency steering group has been established to ensure quality, consistency and joint-learning. In addition, the team have developed a psycho-educational scaffolding model to support practitioners to interpret and apply profiling information effectively by consulting, reflecting and developing confidence. The process also helps parents and carers to develop a deeper understanding of their child's strengths, needs and experiences, strengthening joint-understanding between families and professionals. Consequently, the work improves the quality of assessments, decision-making and support-planning, whilst strengthening the workforce's ability to effectively meet the needs of neuro-divergent children, young people and families.

The staff training programme has developed substantially over the past two years, moving beyond the e-learning modules to include face-to-face training, consultation, practice communities and continuous support to the workforce. Although we are monitoring the e-learning training completion rates, these figures do not fully reflect the magnitude of the learning, professional development or increased confidence that can be seen across social care services. Awtistiaeth Gwynedd also provide corporate training to managers and team leaders to develop a neuro-inclusive workforce and strengthen understanding of neuro-divergence amongst the workforce. There is increasing evidence of more neuro-inclusive practices and more confidence amongst practitioners and managers when supporting neuro-divergent individuals, families and colleagues. As well as the advantages to the workforce, this work contributes towards improving the way that services are planned and provided, ensuring more accessible, sensitive and effective responses to citizens and families across Gwynedd.

There are groups such as *'Paned a Sgwrs'* for parents and carers, and they have guest speakers attending to discuss specific issues. A high number of parents benefit from the space to discuss and share experiences. Families have a support network and can reach out to each other and share experiences, as well as receiving information, advice and support from services that facilitate the groups.

Clwb Niwro - a club for young people - continues to be successful and provides opportunities for neuro-divergent young people to socialise, develop confidence and support their health and well-being. The provision is presented in partnership with the Youth Service, supporting the work of developing more inclusive services and mainstreaming opportunities for neuro-divergent young people in their local communities. In September, a pilot was launched in Ysgol Ardudwy to support neuro-divergent young people to understand and investigate their identity and neuro-divergence. The learning

from the pilot will drive the development of similar provision in the future, in the hope of extending the model to other catchment areas across Gwynedd.

The Niwro Cymru app, developed by Awtistiaeth Gwynedd, provides information, advice and support to the neuro-divergent community and professionals, and it continues to grow in its use and influence. As a result of the App's success, local authorities across Wales are interested, with Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan now in the early stages of joining the venture, which strengthens its potential as a national resource for neuro-divergent communities.

We trust that there are no direct concerns regarding the plan's implementation at present. However, there is uncertainty regarding the continuation of the service post March 2027, when the current funding ends. As well as the potential impact on service users, there is a risk of losing a specialist team that has been key in leading innovative work in the autism and neuro-divergent field locally, regionally and nationally. Losing this expertise would affect the sustainability of the service and the Council's ability to continue to develop and lead in the field, endangering the substantial progress made over the past few years.

Residential provision for looked after children in small group homes

The Plan for developing residential provision for looked after children in small group homes has now progressed significantly. The home in Morfa Bychan has been operational with two children living there since 2025, and we have received a registration from Care Inspectorate Wales.

The home in Deiniolen is now operational with two children living there since the end of 2025. We are still awaiting registration from Care Inspectorate Wales as a piece of building control work needs to be completed but we hope that the registration will reach us soon.

By now, the home in Criccieth is also operational, with two children living there since the beginning of September and they have settled well. The situation in Criccieth is similar to the situation in Deiniolen. A CIW registration application has been submitted, with some further matters receiving attention as part of the process.

Our fourth house is in Edern, and the development work is nearing completion by the end of October. The Building Regulations process is being completed as part of the registration requirements.

Ensuring a suitable property and completing the necessary adaptation work continues to be a complex process that requires close collaboration between departments and partners. Meeting the regulatory needs and ensuring a Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) registration is an essential step. We often collaborate with the Housing and Property Department and Building Control to make sure that the houses' registration happens as soon as possible. Another challenge we face is the housing market, as many houses are not suitable for residential provision. This is due to several factors, e.g. location, size of the houses, property cost, refurbishment work to bring the houses up to building control and Care Inspectorate Wales standards.

The Department's day-to-day work

At the end of September, there were 289 looked after children in Gwynedd, which is six additional children compared to this time last year. On a positive note, 3% of children have left care and have returned home. Another positive percentage that should be highlighted is the number of case conferences where the child's voice/opinion (5+ years) was heard. That percentage was 100%, which is higher than at the end of last year. The Out of Hours Team is also doing excellent work ensuring that every call is responded to before the shift ends.

The Youth Justice Service has noted that their new Regional Policy for Out-of-Court Disposals is proving successful, with a substantial improvement in performance and consistency when providing the service; the number coming into the system for the first time is at its lowest level since this measure began.

Over the summer, activity sessions have been very successful in the Early Years Service, with 568 children aged between 0-16 years and 293 families attending 16 Family Fun Sessions across Gwynedd. 510 children and 252 parents attending the Play Trailer sessions, as well as 3 sessions to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Flying Start that were held at Blaenau Ffestiniog, Caernarfon and Maesgeirchen.

Over the summer, the Fostering Service was very proactive with several events at the Eisteddfod, Summer of Fun and recruitment sessions, which corresponded with the work of Eliminating Profit from Care by 2030. In addition, we saw good collaboration since April 2026 to be able to report on returning home interviews after children or young people were identified as missing. 55 children have been identified as missing children over the period, and 164 returning home interviews have been held. The number of interviews is higher than the number of missing children as many of the children go missing on more than one occasion. We have appointed a Team Manager to lead on the work of introducing our new quality assurance framework. This includes our annual audit programme, which supports performance monitoring, noting areas for improvement, and promoting high-quality practice across the service.

This past period has been challenging for the Department, with an increase in the number of referrals reaching us through the Referral Intake Team and due to the complexities of the referrals received, which increases the demand for Strategy Discussions and Part 5 Discussions. Each team has stated that cases are becoming more complex and that more children come under the child protection category, with 136 children now on the Child Protection register. Children remain on the register for longer, with the number of days, on average, now at 308 days. The 16+ Team also continues to report that demand for services is still high, with 247 cases currently open to them at the end of September. The increasing pattern of referrals and complexity of cases here in Gwynedd is cause for concern. We see a clear pattern that the demand on the Children and Supporting Families Department is rising and hence the pressure on our staff. This is a pattern that is seen across children's services in all local authorities.

We must emphasise that we have acknowledged this increasing work pressure on our workforce. In light of the increasing pressure, the department has submitted bids, with

several successful bids made for 2026-2027. This included £320,000 for the operational teams, in line with the new family support statutory requirement and for social care worker posts. £175,000 was received for joint case contributions with Health in the Derwen Service, £75,000 for legal and medical fees of specialist cases relating to court cases, £120,000 for additional workers for the post-care team. There was a £60,000 contribution towards the costs of North Wales Adoption Service. There was a joint bid with adults for additional responsibilities because of new statutory requirements worth £70,790. These bids come to a total of £791,150.

As well as the above bids, an additional bid was submitted following the recommendations of the 'Our Bravery Brought Justice' Child Practice Review, which comes to a total of £584,500.

There are several projects in the Children's Department, which are funded through a RIF project and the funding for these projects will finish at the end of March 2027. This is concerning for the Department because the projects over the past 5 years have been essential for the services to thrive to help children, young people and families and have made a difference to the lives of individuals. This concern creates instability amongst our staff and there is potential to lose experienced staff as a result. We are now aware that funding is available for the next 5 years, but as yet there are no assurances that we will be able to continue funding the current projects as they are, although this is our hope as a Service.

Should we succeed with the bids, it provides consistency for services and an opportunity to build on them to give the best to children and families.

External Auditors' Reports

Following the publication of the 'Our Bravery Brought Justice' Child Practice Review on 4 November 2025, we as a Department are working closely with the Education Department to fully and promptly respond to the recommendations. The Department provides an update on the recommendations that have emerged from the review to response plan meetings.

No inspections have been carried out in the Service since June, but we had an incredibly busy period at the beginning of this financial year with inspections of the Adoption Service, Derwen Service and Fostering Service.

3. Consultation

The report has been created based on the information and content of a recent meeting to challenge and support the performance of the Children and Supporting Families Department, with the Director, Head of Department, Assistant Heads, Service Managers, Senior Executive Officer and myself attending this meeting.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Progress reports on milestones of projects in the Council Plan
Appendix 2: The Department's Performance Measures