
CARE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
11/04/24

Present:

Councillors:- Beth Lawton (Chair), Menna Baines, Jina Gwyrfai, R. Medwyn Hughes, Dewi Jones, Eryl Jones-Williams, Linda Morgan, Gwynfor Owen, Gareth Coj Parry, Rheinallt Puw, Meryl Roberts, Angela Russell and Einir Wyn Williams.

Officers present:- Llywela Haf Owain (Senior Language and Scrutiny Advisor) and Eirian Roberts (Democracy Services Officer).

Others present:- Councillor Elin Walker Jones (Cabinet Member for Children and Families), Huw Dylan Owen (Statutory Director of Social Services), Marian Parry Hughes (Head of Children and Supporting Families Department) and Aled Gibbard (Assistant Head of Resources - Children and Supporting Families).

Present for item 5:- Councillor Dilwyn Morgan (Cabinet Member for Adults, Health and Well-being), Rhion Glyn (Assistant Head - Adults, Health and Well-being) and Geraint Wyn Jones (Customer Care Officer - Adults, Health and Well-being).

Present for item 7:- Councillor Beca Brown (Cabinet Member for Education), Vera Jones (Democracy Services Manager), Delyth Gibbard (Senior Specialist Communication and Interaction Teacher), Lucy Hemmings (Autism Practice Lead) and Einir Wyn Peters (Senior Educational Psychologist).

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Anwen Davies, Elwyn Jones and Linda Ann Jones.

A speedy recovery was wished to members who were currently poorly.

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

Councillor Gwynfor Owen declared a personal interest in item 7 as his son was autistic.

He was of the opinion that it was a prejudicial interest, and he left the meeting during the discussion on the item.

3. URGENT ITEMS

None to note.

4. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous meeting of this committee held on 1 February 2024 as a true record.

5. COMPLAINTS, ENQUIRIES AND EXPRESSIONS OF GRATITUDE PROCEDURE FOR 2022-23 - CHILDREN AND SUPPORTING FAMILIES DEPARTMENT AND THE ADULTS, HEALTH AND WELL-BEING DEPARTMENT

The Cabinet Member for Children and Families, the Cabinet Member for Adults, Health and Well-being and the officers were welcomed to the meeting.

Submitted - Annual Report on the Children and Supporting Families Department and the Adults, Health and Well-being Department's Complaints, Enquiries and Expressions of Gratitude Procedure for 2022-23. The committee was invited to scrutinise the arrangements for dealing effectively with complaints received from service users and their representatives.

The two Cabinet Members set out the context, thanking staff from both departments for their commitment when responding to complaints and expressions of gratitude from the public and service users. The Customer Care Officer - Adults, Health and Well-being then gave an overview of the report's content.

Members were then given the opportunity to ask questions and submit observations.

It was requested to inform members whether there was a trend of something going wrong, instead of the members hearing about those complaints on the media or from members of the public. In response, it was noted that:-

- It was wished to avoid such situations and it was attempted to ensure that contact with the Council's Press Team worked as conveniently as possible in terms of informing them of anything that was likely to raise.
- It was clear that examples sometimes arose where that had not happened, and there was always room for improvement.

It was noted that it was comforting to see that there was a clear procedure to submit complaints and deal with complaints, but it was suggested that telling people that their complaint could not be received at the time because another investigation was underway caused more concern to those people, who had already reached the end of their tether. Enquiries were made about the arrangements for re-submitting such a complaint once the other investigation had come to an end. In response, it was noted that:-

- It was not legally possible to respond to a complaint if an investigation, e.g. a Police investigation, was underway as this could be prejudicial to any other investigation.
- The person who submitted the complaint received a leaflet explaining that it was not possible to look into the complaint straight away in some cases and welcomed them to re-submit the complaint once any other investigation had concluded.
- In some cases, e.g. investigation under the Safeguarding procedures, it was possible to discover that the process had concluded and offer the complainant to re-submit their complaint. Also, a process that had already started could sometimes be sufficient to solve the matter so as to ensure that there was no need to raise the complaint again.

It was noted that the two findings that derived from the report this year was that the expectations of families of the service was extremely high and there was a need for clear and regular communication. It was enquired whether it was possible to manage the expectations by informing families from the outset that it was not possible for the Council to offer everything to them. In response, it was noted that:-

- It was believed that this was relevant to the Children Department because of the Service's intervention in the families' lives on safeguarding matters, as well as the complexity of the processes.
- In terms of safeguarding matters, complaints were received that children's guardianship was back with the families etc., but if the Department had gone through all the procedures and possibilities, it was a matter of communicating that to the family.
- It was impossible to say at the beginning of a safeguarding investigation how the arrangements proceeded and what was the potential outcome. Therefore, it was a matter of communicating to families in a way that was more sensitive to their needs, knowing that they would be disappointed at times, and would obviously wish to complain about that.
- It was attempted to solve such complaints at the first stage by meeting with the families to explain what was happening and the reasons for that.

It was noted that it was good to see that no cases had been referred to the Ombudsman, and that all complaints had been solved in the first stage.

It was noted that the number of complaints were very low considering the number of cases that the Social Services dealt with, but some concern was expressed regarding the definition of a complaint, bearing in mind that members also received complaints from their electors (although not formal complaints) and referred them to the departments. The officers were thanked for providing answers to those complaints and it was noted that this was a big step forward to prevent complaints or informal enquiries from becoming a formal complaint. It was also noted that people's expectations were definitely high, considering that they were worried about their families or themselves as individuals. In response to the observation regarding the definition of a complaint, it was noted that:-

- There was a definition of an official complaint in the regulations provided by the Welsh Government.
- Many enquiries were received regarding the status of the service provided to individuals etc., from members of parliament and councillors and a response was provided to them straight away.
- It was possible for families to raise a formal complaint through their local councillor.

A member noted that he had received permission from the Monitoring Officer to refer to his personal experience of going through the complaints process as an individual in the past. He noted:-

- As he was not happy with the response to his complaint, he requested to go to stage 2, which was to have an independent investigator.

- That the only Welsh investigator that he managed to find was someone who used to work for the Social Services in Gwynedd, and possibly had a close relationship with some members of the Team.
- As the response that he received to the investigation was not very different to the answer he had in stage 1, he referred his complaint to the Ombudsman.
- He understood that the Ombudsman was only willing to look into the complaint if the Social Services had said that they had offered the service in the first place, but once again, did not do that. If the Social Services did not say that they offered the service, there were no grounds to take the complaint further.
- He was very disappointed that it was not possible to take the complaint further and he was eager to share his personal experience as it was likely that this was also the experience of others.
- Although he had nothing but praise for the way that the Customer Care Officer dealt with him at the time, he felt that the main response to the complaint was to try and defend the Service, instead of looking at how the public could be served better in the future.

In response, it was noted that:-

- It was wished to give assurance to the member that the Children's Service took every complaint seriously and the Head of Department was aware of every complaint within the service and had an input in the response to complainants.
- The Head of Department was also interviewed as part of stage 2 complaints by independent investigators, and in terms of the availability of Welsh speakers to investigate complaints, she was aware of about 5 Welsh investigators who had dealt with the Service's complaints during the previous year. However, it was accepted that the situation could be different during the Covid period when the member was going through the process.
- The Children's Service tried to solve every complaint in the first stages and felt that they had failed if the complaint reached the Ombudsman.
- It was not believed that the Children's Services behaved defensively and that everyone was always ready to learn from the lessons and improve services.
- Not many trends highlighted themselves in the Children's Services because all the cases were so individual and unique, and the complaints related to quite detailed things regarding people's lives.
- There was an attempt to improve communication continually through the social work teams and the social workers involved with the families.
- The arrangements of the Adults Service were similar to the arrangements of the Children's Service.

It was noted that many of the complaints related to lack of clear or consistent communication and it was enquired what the two departments intended to do to prevent this from always arising. In response, it was noted that:-

- The Adults Service did not receive many complaints regarding lack of communication.
- In terms of the Children's Service, it was believed that this related to the fact that families could be disappointed that the messages conveyed to them were not communicated to them from the start, but as had been noted in response to a

previous question, it was impossible to say at the beginning of an investigation what the outcome would be.

- If there was genuine concern that there were communication errors, the Children's Service Management Team would discuss those matters. A meeting would also be held with the individual social worker and their manager to see whether the worker needed any further training opportunities or further awareness raised, whilst also considering whether there were any disciplinary matters that needed to be addressed deriving from any complaints that had been confirmed.
- As the nature of Children's Service's complaints related to individual workers instead of specific teams, there was a need to look at each individual and try to address the matters that related to the complaints on this specific case.

It was enquired why the number of complaints had increased so much in the last year. In response, it was noted that:-

- The number of complaints about the Adults Service was lower in 2020/21 during the lockdown periods and had increased back to its normal levels since then. Table 2 of the report noted that the number of formal complaints had reduced from 33 during 2021/22 to 24 during 2022/23, and although the 2023/24 report had not been prepared yet, it was not anticipated that the figures would be much different to that.
- The table in the report showed that the Children's Service had also received fewer complaints during the last year. Despite that, it was felt that complaints were welcomed because there was always room to improve and develop.
- It was possible that the number of stage 2 complaints about the Children's Service was higher this year. Three were currently underway and one had been completed slightly outside of the current reporting window.
- It was felt that the number of enquiries from members of parliament and councillors on behalf of their electors was increasing and it was emphasised that a full response could be provided at this stage to prevent enquiries from developing into a formal complaint.
- The Service also related to a number of matters that did not reach stage 1, because it was possible to solve them to the individual's satisfaction outside the formal complaints arrangement.

It was suggested that staff shortages in the Adults Service was at the root of the majority of the complaints. In response, it was noted that:-

- It was believed that the nature of the complaints derived from shortcomings in front-line services as a result of the challenges in staff recruitment and retention, whether in the residential care field or the adults care field, and also more generally in terms of residential homes.
- The number of complaints regarding the domiciliary care provision had been higher during the last quarter of 2022/23 and that went hand in hand with care providers moving from the area during that period.
- The situation remained to be challenging in terms of waiting lists for domiciliary care, especially in some parts of the county, but the Service did everything within its ability to put arrangements in place to try and retain the current staff and recruit new staff, including holding successful recruiting campaigns.

It was noted that it was encouraging to understand that recruiting campaigns had been successful and the importance of continuing to host them was emphasised.

It was enquired what right did carers have to present a complaint on behalf of a service user, remembering that those individuals often had capacity but did not like to complain.

In response, it was noted that:-

- Generally, the personal data of the individual who received the service had to be protected and the services that the user received could not be discussed with anyone else without permission.
- If an individual had the capacity to decide to make a complaint, they would be asked to do so themselves or give clear permission for someone else to complain on their behalf.

It was noted that the response proved how difficult it was to make a complaint against the service. In response, it was noted that:-

- Everyone who worked in the field had a responsibility to report any safeguarding matter that they were concerned about and that situations had arisen where the individual who raised the safeguarding case had to share that with the individual who possibly received the service, explaining why the matter had been raised.
- The communication was clearly integral and the situation could also be sensitive.
- The situation in terms of receiving complaints and making the most of complaints and learning from them was extremely important to the Social Services, but at the same time, it was very difficult to strike the right balance in a sensitive situation with people who were very vulnerable, and how to promote people to make complaints and how to offer that without over-offering.
- It was important that we had an effective and qualified workforce to do the work in a sensitive way.
- People were often afraid of complaining, but it was believed that receiving complaints benefited the Service, not only in terms of humility, but also in terms of learning and allowing the team to provide the best possible service.

The fact that the number of complaints had reduced last year was welcomed and it was noted that the number was rather low considering the number of cases the departments dealt with. It was noted that it came as no surprise when hearing that a theme started to emerge in terms of complaints regarding domiciliary care, considering the recruitment problems in the field, and it was suggested that this was something to keep an eye on. Appreciation was expressed of the examples of gratitude and praise that were in the report and it was noted that this showed that there was a human face to the services that were being offered. In response, it was noted that:-

- They wished to thank for the appreciation of these expressions of gratitude in the report as it was extremely important that the hard work of workforces in difficult situations was acknowledged.
- In terms of the reduction in the number of complaints, not receiving complaints was not the goal, but to allow people to complain as much as was appropriate.

Reference was made to an observation in the report that three complaints had been received regarding the quality of work of one of the external providers commissioned to provide Direct Payments services to service users, and it was enquired what the Business Unit had done to ensure that the quality had improved. In response, it was noted that the contract with the company had come to an end and the service was now provided internally.

At the end of the discussion, it was explained that this item was usually presented to the scrutiny committee in September each year. Apologies were expressed that the 2022-23 report arrived late and it was noted that the 2023-24 report would be available soon for consideration in the next few months.

RESOLVED to accept the report, noting that it was nice to see the expressions of gratitude, and for the committee to scrutinise the Annual Report on the Complaints, Enquiries and Expressions of Gratitude Procedure for 2023-24 when it will be ready in the coming months.

6. SHORT BREAKS SERVICE (DERWEN INTERGRATED TEAM)

Submitted - the report of the Cabinet Member for Children and Families on the Short Breaks service (Derwen Integrated Team). The committee was invited to scrutinise the content of the report to have assurance that suitable provision was available for everyone who needed the service.

The Cabinet Member set out the context and thanked the staff for their tireless work and their enthusiasm and love whilst working with the most vulnerable children in Gwynedd. The Assistant Head of Resources - Children and Supporting Families expanded on the content of the report and members were given the opportunity to ask questions and offer observations.

It was noted that the report and the presentation highlighted the huge demand for the short breaks service, and it was clear that excellent and vital work was being done.

Attention was given to the demand for a short breaks service for adults too, but it was explained that this item only discussed the provision for children.

Concern was expressed from understanding that the number of volunteers had reduced from 20 before the Covid period to 3 by now. It was enquired what was being done to try and recruit more volunteers, and it was requested whether it was possible to use the current volunteers in an effort to try and attract more. In response, it was noted that:-

- As it was not possible to continue with the short breaks plan over the lockdown periods, many volunteers were lost as people moved on.
- The Short Breaks Officer met regularly with Bangor University, which was the main contact in terms of recruitment campaigns.
- They agreed with the observation regarding using current volunteers, but all they could do was highlight that the opportunities existed and be as proactive as possible in terms of responding to any enquiries.
- Five prospective volunteers were currently going through the DBS process and it was hoped that these individuals would soon be available for the service in order to make a difference.

- It was possible that the cost-of-living crisis impacted people's desire to put themselves forward to volunteer, but the Service would definitely persevere to try and increase the number.

It was enquired what service was offered to families of children with less intense needs as well as what were the projections for the future, considering that the demand increased year on year. It was also requested whether they could be confident that we could meet the intense needs, without mentioning the other needs, in the face of the Council's financial situation for the next few years. In response, it was noted that:-

- The questions reflected the challenges that the Service faced and clearly discussed them in terms of development etc., and how to adapt the service to meet the needs that arose.
- The current provision addressed a variety of needs, not only the higher needs, with the higher needs tended to be short breaks in Hafan y Sêr and perhaps more supportive hours than the lower needs.
- A range of needs were provided in the supportive hours and that trying to analyse some of them was a part of work that they might not have managed to undertake for this report, but it was possible to do it with some effort.
- The volunteer service's activities were specifically for the lower needs levels, with less dependency, perhaps, on a social worker assessment to provide that, whilst the care and support assessment from social workers was an integral part of the need in connection with the overnight services and the more intense support services.
- Addressing the needs for the future would be challenging, especially considering the Council's financial situation, and if there were assessments that showed the demand, then there would be a responsibility on the Service to somehow provide that. This was the challenge faced in terms of planning services and it was not possible to answer with any assurance in terms of how the increase in the demand would change again.

It was asked whether there was a waiting list to go to Hafan y Sêr, and if there was, how long were individuals on that waiting list. It was also enquired if Hafan y Sêr was now full following Covid. In response, it was noted that:-

- Although the Hafan y Sêr manager tried to maximise the numbers that could stay in the unit every night, it was challenging to always fill the six beds in the unit, but that was not because of staffing reasons. The unit's staffing had always been fairly stable, and in addition to the staff on fixed contracts, there was also a bank of reserve staff for individual situations.
- There was a need to vary staff to correspond with the children's needs, e.g. some children did not sleep throughout the night and some children needed two staff members, and this was all a part of the planning work when accepting a child into the unit.
- This was the factor that sometimes led to the fact that a child had to wait for room in the unit, because there was a need to consider what other children would be staying in the unit at the same time as that child, and what were the needs of all children and whether those needs blended together.
- It was possible that some children had rather challenging needs that could destabilise other children, and that was all in the hands of the manager in terms of the preparation work.
- The waiting list for room overnight at the unit could take approximately three months, but that included introducing the children gradually to the unit during the period.

- In terms of the children's ages that were generally open to Derwen, more young children currently came in than older children leaving. It was believed that the same was true about Hafan y Sêr, and this would have an impact on the capacity and the turnover and waiting lists in the end. This was also a daily challenge in terms of planning adjustments, that were planned months in advance.
- The Service was very happy with the provision in Hafan y Sêr, but more of this type of provision was needed to meet the need.
- The benefit that families had from their child spending a night or two in the unit was huge, and kept families together.
- In terms of general capacity and the waiting lists, families could go through a period of crisis where changes happened and the child's behaviour was possibly more challenging than usual, and the unit tried their best to respond to such situations by offering and adapting the stays.

In her closing comments, the Cabinet Member noted that:-

- She had a conversation with Bangor University's Volunteer Officer regarding this matter and there had been discussions to support the fantastic work of the Short Breaks Officer who tried to recruit more volunteers.
- The Cabinet had protected the funding of this type of provision for the most vulnerable children until now, but the Council faced completely unprecedented challenges over the coming years. Therefore, she would appreciate the committee's support to ensure that these children would not lose a penny of this provision and she would do everything in her ability to ensure that the provision did not face cuts, considering the context.

RESOLVED to accept the report and to thank everyone who worked in the Short Breaks Service, and expressed hope that the funding would be available to continue to offer the service for everyone who needed it as time went on.

7. AUTISM PLAN TASK AND FINISH GROUP

Submitted - the report of the Chair of the Autism Plan Task and Finish Group, Councillor Elwyn Jones, which invited the committee to scrutinise findings and recommendations of the Task and Finish Group.

In the absence of Councillor Elwyn Jones from the meeting, the report was presented by the Democracy and Language Services Manager. It was noted that the Chair of the Task and Finish Group wished to:-

- Thank all the officers, not only for their work in preparing before the task group meeting, but also for their contribution during the meeting and their clear and honest answers.
- Thank his fellow councillors for the preparation work before the meeting and for presenting such good questions during the meeting, and that he was of the opinion that ensuring clear understanding came as a result of robust questioning and responses.
- Emphasise that every member also had an integral role to participate in the training available in the autism field.

Members were given an opportunity to ask questions and offer observations.

A member of the Task and Finish Group noted that:-

- The personal experience and professional insight of Councillors Dawn Jones and Gwynfor Owen had steered the Group's discussions, and he thanked them for their valuable contributions.
- It was a pleasure to collaborate and see the work that went into the autism field and clear transparency and honest discussion was had with the officers.
- He wished to give specific attention to recommendation 3, which related to ensuring that the development of any new school or adjustments to any school in the future was suitable for individuals with autism, and recommendation 4, which asked for an update for the committee after a further 12 months of operating to ensure that progress continued.

The Statutory Director of Social Services noted that:-

- This was an excellent report and that he was happy that the Group had addressed this extremely important subject.
- The autism field was a field that was increasing in terms of the number of people who needed support and was a field that increased in terms of complexity too.
- One of the most challenging factors was that a grant paid for a substantial percentage of the new Autism Team, and because there was no assurance that the Welsh Government would protect this money in the future, there was a need to safeguard the Council and the people who received the services by looking at that.
- There was definitely a need to take advice when planning any new building or adaptation to any of the Council's buildings or schools to ensure that they were suitable for individuals with autism, but it would suggest amending the wording of recommendation 3 as follows in order to reflect the fact that the Education Department had their own team who had specific expertise in terms of building schools, and also to clearly highlight the responsibilities:-

Recommend that the Scrutiny Committee, jointly with the Cabinet Member for Children and Families, contacted the Cabinet Member for Housing and Property to ensure input from the *Additional Learning Needs Service* for the development of any new school or adaptations to any school in the future in order to make it suitable for individuals with autism, e.g. quiet space, the ability to dim lighting etc. It would be beneficial to establish the principle of ensuring input from the Autism Team (*Children and Adults Department*) for any new development or adaptation to any other building.

The work of the Task and Finish Group was welcomed and it was noted that this was one example of what the Care Scrutiny Committee had done to ensure that appropriate attention was given to people with autism. Everyone was thanked for their work, especially those councillors who had insisted that appropriate attention was given to the autism field following receiving a complaint about the service some years ago.

The Cabinet Member for Children and Families noted that:-

- The recommendations of the Task and Finish Group would be very beneficial and that she agreed with the Social Services Statutory Director's observations and was happy to support in any way that she could.
- She would encourage the members to go on the Autism Bus and discussions had been held regarding hosting training beyond the Autism Bus on how to support staff in order to support families where a child was waiting for diagnosis or had been diagnosed.

The Cabinet Member for Education noted that:-

- She also felt very strongly about this important field and was happy to see the report and the recommendations and the genuine and clear effort to promote collaboration across teams and organisations, which was extremely important.
- She agreed with the observation in terms of referring an element of the work to the ALN Service.
- She welcomed the referral to avoid only allowing individuals with autism (i.e. without learning difficulties) to fall through the net because ensuring support to people who did not always highlight their autism was extremely important.
- She completely agreed with the need to consider the needs of children and young people with autism when planning schools and the need for quiet areas to ensure that individuals had space to retreat into in the middle of the hustle and bustle of a school.
- She was concerned about the waiting lists for diagnosis and concern for those young people where the school environment was too much for them and the lack of consistent support to their specific needs.
- She took advantage of every opportunity to convey the message to the Welsh Government regarding the staffing challenges and capacity challenges, especially in the educational psychologists field.
- She welcomed the report and the recommendations and was happy to collaborate in terms of the elements relevant to the education field.

It was enquired whether there was an intention to extend the autism training to all school staff, including catering and cleaning staff etc. In response, it was noted that the Cabinet Member for Education would ask the Department regarding that and expressed how important it was to extend the training to everyone because of sensitivity surrounding different foods and textures etc.

The Cabinet Member for Children and Families noted that:-

- There was a reference in the Council's Equality Plan to the needs of neurodivergent people and that there was an intention to look at employment and equality matters in the neurodiversity context and as a result of the Buckland Review on Autism Employment.
- She agreed with the observation regarding the lack of professional people, especially educational psychologists, to work in the field, and that letters had been sent to the Minister for Education asking to establish an Educational Psychology course in Bangor University as this would be very beneficial to the people of North Wales.

RESOLVED

- 1) To accept the findings of the Task and Finish Group.**
- 2) To ask the service:-**
 - **to undertake an audit of the situation regarding the professional training of staff who work in the field as a first step.**
 - **Then to consider setting a target for completing training with the aim to include it on the core training programme as follows:-**
 - a) staff who work or who come into contact with people with autism (by department and including schools) and**
 - b) raising awareness training amongst all Council staff.**
 - **to build on the training for staff in schools and surgeries regarding referring to the Neuro-Developmental Team in cases where they are not qualified.**

- to encourage all the Councillors to follow the Autism Awareness training e-module and attend open days across the County which enables everyone to experience the autism bus.
- 3) Recommend that the Scrutiny Committee, jointly with the Cabinet Member for Children and Families, would contact the Cabinet Member for Housing and Property to ensure input from the Additional Learning Needs Service for the development of any new school or adaptations to any school in the future to make it suitable for individuals with autism e.g. quiet space, the ability to dim lighting etc. It would be beneficial to establish the principle of ensuring input from the Autism Team (Children and Adults Department) for any new development or adaptation to any other building from the Council.
 - 4) Following concern that the plan is currently funded through a grant, the Care Scrutiny Committee asked for an update after a further 12 months of operating to ensure that progress continues, requesting the input of Education and Health once again.

The meeting commenced at 10.30am and concluded at 12.25pm.

Chair