

MEETING	Care Scrutiny Committee
DATE	11 April 2024
ITEM	AUTISM PLAN TASK AND FINISH GROUP
PURPOSE	To present the findings and recommendations of the Task and Finish Group
TASK AND FINISH GROUP CHAIR	Councillor Elwyn Jones
AUTHOR	Vera Jones, Democracy and Language Manager

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 An update on the Gwynedd Autism Plan was presented to a meeting of the Care Scrutiny Committee on 20 April 2023. Responses were provided to several matters that were discussed during the committee meeting, but some additional issues arose, and it was decided to establish a task and finish group to discuss these matters further.
- 1.2 A brief for the work was developed, and by January 2024 the membership of the group was established: Councillors Elwyn Jones, Gareth Coj Parry, Jina Gwyrfai, Gwynfor Owen and Dawn Lynne Jones. The brief was updated to include the membership, relevant officers and a timetable, and the updated brief can be found in Appendix A.
- 1.3 The task and finish group members met on 19 February 2024 with a task to “ensure an understanding of the implementation of the Gwynedd Autism Plan as a whole”, including:
- an understanding of the support available to individuals and their families when awaiting an assessment, and whether there are any barriers on the road to an assessment
 - following the wait for an assessment or diagnosis, in particular the support available for children within our schools, and whether there are any barriers
- 1.4 The group wishes to thank all the officers and relevant teams for their hard work supporting individuals and their families in the field of Autism – it is a significant step forward to be working across teams and organisations, and this is to be welcomed.

2. TASK AND FINISH GROUP DISCUSSIONS

- 2.1 Papers were submitted prior to the meeting held on 19 February, where Aled Gibbard gave a brief presentation on the progress of the Autism Plan, Dr Einir Peters on behalf of Natalie Woodward gave a presentation on the arrangements regarding waiting for a neuro-developmental assessment, and Delyth Gibbard reported on the support within Education. Members were given an opportunity to ask questions.

An update on the implementation of the Gwynedd Autism Plan, outlining the additional steps that had been delivered since the presentation to the Care Scrutiny Committee on 20 April 2023.

- 2.3 An update was presented on the steps that had been delivered and those that were underway, and all the Councillors were given an opportunity to ask questions.

- 2.4 While acknowledging that the services supported a wide range of needs, it was noted that there was a need to ensure that nobody fell through the net, e.g., individuals with autism only (no learning disability). During the discussion it was highlighted that support was available across all the services, which was crucial. There is a need to highlight the input and collaboration across the various departments (and with other agencies) as part of the Autism Plan was noted.
- 2.5 It was also noted that there was scope to strengthen the wording to note that the purpose should be to "develop a strategic direction" rather than "provide a context for developing a strategic direction" when updating the plan in 2024-25, although the explanation that the original wording was suitable for the beginning of the journey was accepted.
- 2.6 A number of matters were raised in relation to young people, in particular that the pathway available to 16-year-olds while awaiting an assessment varied, as the needs of each individual differed. It was explained that an individual who already received a service would continue to receive the support (e.g., through Derwen, the Disabled Children's Integrated Team), while anyone could contact the Autism team to receive advice and guidance.
- 2.7 It was reported that arrangements for looked after children happened as noted above, and that there was a responsibility to support looked after individuals until they were 25 years old, if they chose to receive that support. It was explained that the collaboration between the children and adults services was key, with continuity planning for support starting from the age of 14, and planning for transition to adults services increasing when the individual was 16-17 years old. The possibility of strengthening and raising awareness of the arrangements in place was discussed.
- 2.8 A discussion was held on the situation regarding training for key staff (who are involved with people with autism) in the children and adults services and within schools, and more general training for everyone. The need to empower as many people as possible through the training, especially front-line staff (e.g., within schools) was noted. The need to ensure that everyone who works directly with Autism received training was emphasised, and it was explained that the code stated clearly that any officer who came into contact with the condition should receive training.
- 2.9 In discussing provision in schools, space within schools was also discussed. It was noted that it should be ensured that there was early input by officers from the field of autism when school buildings or any other new buildings were planned – specifically to ensure that they addressed the needs of pupils with autism (e.g., availability of quiet rooms and the ability to dim lights) while accepting the need to empower the pupils themselves to deal with the factors and their surroundings.

An explanation of the process while individuals (and their families) are waiting for an assessment, the support available while waiting for an assessment and following diagnosis, the barriers that exist and what is being done to address these barriers.

- 2.10 It was explained that families could request an assessment following a discussion with their GP or the Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinator (ALN) in the school, although there were specific guidelines to be followed when requesting an assessment.
- 2.11 Figures were presented that showed that over 50% of children who received an assessment did not receive a diagnosis following a thorough assessment process. A further discussion was held on the complexity of the needs of children and young children, and consequently the

range of behavioural and emotional support that must be provided, particularly in our schools. Concern was expressed that wrongly referring individuals for assessments could be at the expense of individuals with autism. It was noted that the neuro-developmental unit was working with those who made referrals to try to alleviate the situation, and to further raise the referrers' awareness of the requirements.

- 2.12 On the other hand, there was concern that this could close the door if there were individuals (mainly females) who were more able to mask the condition, and it was noted that a "watchful waiting" process had to be followed for a long-term assessment. It was also noted that some individuals were assessed as having a different condition following the process.
- 2.13 It was emphasised that support was provided in relation to behaviour that was presented by pupils in schools, and that being on a waiting list for an assessment should not make any difference. It was noted that there was an opportunity to change the narrative surrounding waiting lists to emphasise that this support was available in the schools.

An explanation from the Education Department of the support available to children within our schools while waiting for an assessment or after receiving a diagnosis. What barriers exist and what is being done to address these?

- 2.14 A request was made to draw attention to the links with the Education Department and its input to the Autism Plan, and it was again emphasised that support was offered within our schools in relation to the needs presented, whether or not the pupils were waiting for an assessment.
- 2.15 It was noted that there had been a recent increase in needs and behaviours, and a question was asked about the impact of this on the capacity of the specialist teams that support school staff. It was reported that the team was currently stable. As part of the discussion on the shortage of language therapists and educational psychologists nationally, it was highlighted that the training arrangements for the professions was challenging as generally requirements by Universities in England require education psychologists who train in England commit to working in England following qualification. Elected Members were pleased to note that discussions are ongoing with the Universities of Wales to come to an understanding for training requirements and availability to train professional officers for the future.
- 2.16 It was explained that training on autism is offered to staff in all schools in Gwynedd and Anglesey, with the training tailored in accordance with the requirements of the schools. However, this was provided in cycles, and therefore it could not be guaranteed that everyone in all schools had received the training due to staff turnover. It was confirmed that retaining trained assistants was problematic, as there was a constant turnover of staff. The need to train staff was discussed, and the possibility of setting targets after establishing a baseline.
- 2.17 A discussion was held on the support for 16-year-old school leavers, and it was noted that systems were being developed between the Education Department and Coleg Meirion Dwyfor to support these individuals, as there was scope to improve the existing arrangements and provision. It was also noted that support was available from the Education service and the Adults service from various teams such as the Autism team, the 16-24 Education team and the employability team – depending on the needs of the individual. Members noted that there was a need to promote the potential support and the links between the various teams, to be highlighted in the Autism Plan.

- 2.18 In discussing the transition between the children or Education team to the adults service it was enquired whether the current method for deciding which team within the Adults service should provide support was the correct one. It was noted that the risks and challenges of the existing arrangements had already been identified and that a person-centred approach should be considered rather than looking at the service "box" that they fell into. Members expressed their support for proceeding with this important work.

Timetable and actions

- 2.19 The timetable and actions for 2023-24 were submitted as part of the meeting papers, and it was noted that the programme and actions for 2024-25 would be drafted soon.
- 2.20 It was mentioned that the Integrated Fund grant funded 70% of the existing plan, and the remaining 30% was funded by Council revenue funding. The grant funding was available for a further 3 to 4 years, although reference was made to the challenge of delivering the developments and proving the plan's success over the coming period.

3. THE TASK AND FINISH GROUP'S FINDINGS

- 3.1 Finding = what we have found as a result of the Task and Finish Group's work.
- 3.2 As seen from the discussions above, attention was drawn to several factors during the session. Some matters had already received attention from the service, and others would receive attention following the session. The findings of the Task and Finish Group are as follows:

a	AUTISM PLAN
	Significant progress has been made over recent months following the establishment of the Autism Team and the work between the various departments and agencies for the benefit of the individual.
b	Autism Plan - wording
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The wording of the purpose of the plan to "develop a strategic direction" rather than "provide a context for developing a strategic direction" • The input of Education, Adults, Health and Children to the plan should be highlighted, and more detail provided about this provision • There is scope to highlight the support available to individuals with autism only, where they have no other condition for which they receive support. In addition, there is scope to highlight the support available from the Autism Team and the information on the various websites.
c	Autism Plan - Transition age provision (14-18 years old)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • scope to raise awareness of the teamwork happening in the background to ensure a seamless transition and support for individuals • scope to highlight and further develop the collaboration with Grŵp Llandrillo Menai to support individuals with autism
ch	Autism Plan - Adults Service Provision
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouragement to proceed with the work already underway to identify the most suitable person to support individuals with autism (depending on whether there are other conditions etc.) rather than trying to place them in a box for support from the mental health team or the learning disabilities team
d	Waiting list for an assessment

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scope to work on trying to change the narrative and emphasise the message that support is available while waiting for an assessment (through the schools, the autism team, awareness sessions / events and websites)
dd	Specialist Staff
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for the ongoing discussions with the Universities of Wales to come to an understanding for training requirements for professional staff for the future.

3.3 Although it is outside the scope of the task and finish group's work, members wished to draw the Committee's attention to the impact of the increased demand on:

- a) the ability of the teams to support individuals with autism and their families
- b) the capacity of the teams to support the whole range of pupil needs, and
- c) the necessary expertise in schools to support all the different needs that exist.

4. TASK AND FINISH GROUP'S RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 The services are requested to specifically consider the above findings. However, some issues have come to our attention that we wish to present specific recommendations in relation to.

4.2 TRAINING

It is recommended that the committee requests that the service:

- initially undertakes an audit of the training situation of professional staff who work in the field
- Then considers setting a target for delivering training, with the intention for it to be included on the core training programme as follows:
 - a) staff working or coming into contact with people with autism (in each department and including schools) and
 - b) awareness raising training for all Council staff.
- Build on the training for school staff and surgeries regarding referrals to the neuro-developmental team in cases where individuals do not qualify
- Encourage all the Councillors to follow the Autism Awareness training e-module and attend open days across the County which enable everyone to experience the autism bus

4.3 PLANNING SCHOOLS AND COUNCIL BUILDINGS

It is recommended that the Scrutiny Committee, in conjunction with the Cabinet Member for Children and Families, contacts the Cabinet Member for Housing and Property to ensure that there is input from the Autism Team to any development of a new school or school adaptations to make them more suitable for individuals with autism e.g. quiet spaces, the ability to dim lighting etc. It would be beneficial to establish the principle of ensuring that the Autism Team has input into any new development or adaptation to any Council building.

4.4 UPDATE TO THE CARE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE.

Following concern that the plan is currently grant funded, it is recommended that the Care Scrutiny Committee requests an update after a further 12 months of implementation to ensure that progress is continuing, and requests input from Education and Health once again.

The Committee is asked to consider the findings and recommendations of the Task and Finish Group.