
CARE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE, THURSDAY, 21 SEPTEMBER 2023

Present: Councillor Beth Lawton (Chair)

Councillors: Jina Gwyrfai, R. Medwyn Hughes, Dewi Jones, Elwyn Jones, Eryl Jones-Williams, Linda Morgan, Gwynfor Owen, Gareth Coj Parry, Rheinallt Puw, Meryl Roberts, Angela Russell, Einir Wyn Williams

Officers in attendance: Llywela Haf Owain (Senior Language and Scrutiny Advisor), Ffion Elaine Evans (Democracy Services Officer) and Ellie Mai Evans (Democracy Services Administrative Assistant).

Others invited:

Councillor Dilwyn Morgan (Cabinet Member for Adults, Health and Well-being)
Huw Dylan Owen (Statutory Director of Social Services)
Aled Davies (Head of Adults, Health and Well-being Department)

Present for items 5 and 6:

Councillor Craig ab Iago (Cabinet Member for Housing)
Carys Fôn Williams (Head of Housing and Property Department)
Hedd Morlais Glyn Tomos (Assistant Head of Housing and Property Department)
Gareth Wyn Parri (Commissioning Team Leader)

Present for item 7:

Amanda Ellen Davies (Learning Disability Practice Lead)
Bethan Wyn Evans (Category and Development Specialist)

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Menna Baines, Anwen J. Davies and Linda Ann Jones.

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

The following members declared that they had an interest in relation to the item noted:

- Councillor Elwyn Jones in item 5 as members of his family were homeless. The Member was of the opinion that it was not a prejudicial interest and he did not withdraw from the meeting.
- Councillor Gwynfor Owen in item 8 on the agenda as his son was autistic. The Member was of the opinion that it was not a prejudicial interest and he did not withdraw from the meeting.

3. URGENT ITEMS

None to note.

4. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous meeting of this Committee held on 22 June 2023 as a true record.

5. HOUSING ALLOCATION POLICY AND HOUSING WAITING LIST

The report was submitted explaining that a further update on the Housing Allocation Policy was in question and that the policy had already been submitted before the Care Scrutiny Committee in the past. It was explained that changes had been made to the Council's policy in the context of which bands housing applications were determined to and that the current policy had now been in operation for nearly three years. It was noted that the policy had managed to maximise the number of houses let to Gwynedd residents from 90% to 96.7% and that this was a very high percentage, especially considering that local connection could not be considered as an essential priority criterion in every application.

It was explained that the Welsh Government intended to publish a White Paper in October 2023 that would review the legislation and undertake fundamental changes on the way homelessness was dealt with in Wales. Due to the link between homelessness and social housing, the side effect of examining the legislation review on homelessness was the need to re-examine how social housing was let and any side effects that derived from that process.

It was noted that the Housing Department was waiting eagerly to see the White Paper to gain an understanding of the Government's direction. It was explained that they had a fairly good idea as they had attended regular meetings and discussions with the Government over the past few months and had been given an opportunity to note their opinions and feelings about the potential changes. Therefore, it was noted that they hoped that nothing too shocking would be included in the White Paper, but the department would need a bit of time to evaluate its contents and any impact it could have on Council policies. It was explained that considerable work was likely to face the department once the White Paper would be published.

During the discussion, the following observations were noted:

- The members expressed their thanks for the report noting pride in the success of the policy so far.
- Questions were raised about the definition of local connection and concern was expressed that the Council could say it had been successful when providing a house to someone from Aberdyfi in Bethesda. An explanation was requested of how it could be ensured that vulnerable people could remain in their communities.
 - o In response, it was explained that although every authority had an element of flexibility when it came to a Housing Allocation Policy, that statutory priority had to be given to 5 categories of people and, therefore, the local connection element had to be secondary to those statutory categories.
 - o It was noted that Cyngor Gwynedd had added a community connection tier which went further than local connection. In a situation where applicants were equal in the same priority band, it was explained that people with a community connection would be given priority over those who did not have a community connection.

- It was explained that 54% of the recent placements had been given to applicants with a community connection. Although the figure appeared low on the face of it, it was explained that there was a lack of suitable accommodation in some communities for example, no flats for single people in more rural areas, which directly contributed to the figure. It was confirmed that the figure was much higher if people with a connection to nearby communities were considered.
 - In the context of strengthening the local connection element, it was noted that it would be difficult to see what else could be done within the constraints of the current guidelines and legislation and, therefore, we would have to wait and see what was stated in the White Paper.
- It was confirmed that the Council received substantial funding from the Welsh Government every year to support people facing homelessness and that they collaborated with external agencies to ensure that people could keep hold of their tenancies.
- In response to a question about the role of housing associations in the process of determining who was given a house, it was explained that the policy drove the decision and that a clear prioritisation system was included in the policy.
 - It was noted that the Council historically produced the priority list but officers of housing associations now did this. However, it was confirmed that the same policy was used and that a valid reason would be required not to give the property to the person on top of the list.
 - It was explained that decisions about individual applications should not be taken unless in exceptional circumstances as this was contrary to the policy.
 - It was noted that the Council was in the process of working on a computer system that would make it impossible to omit an applicant as it would not be possible to offer the property to the next person on the list.
 - In terms of accountability, it was confirmed that the Council was responsible for the register and that it received letting reports from the housing associations to be able to monitor the decisions being made.
- It was explained that the Council itself did not construct social housing; it worked instead with partners and housing associations in order to construct them. It was noted that there had been an increase in available funding to construct social housing and, in terms of the process, it was explained that the housing associations identified potential schemes and then the Council assessed which ones they would prioritise.
- It was confirmed that the revenue from the additional tax would be used to construct affordable homes, not social housing.
- It was noted that the application form for social housing was available on the Council website and, although the form had been reduced from 20 to 12 pages, the fact that it was a long form that asked a number of questions was acknowledged. It was explained that the questions were asked for specific reasons although this was not always clear to the applicant.
- It was explained that the process of ensuring that houses purchased by the Council were ready had taken longer than expected but it was hoped that they could be filled as soon as possible within the next few months.
- Concern was expressed about where essential workers fitted into the policy, especially considering that it was not possible to obtain workers in some parts of Gwynedd due to a lack of accommodation for them.
 - In response, it was noted that the law noted that priority must be shown to 5 categories of people and that essential workers were not included in these.

- Despite this, it was noted that there was an element of flexibility for the Council to review this but there was a need to wait now to see the changes associated with the White Paper.
- Several questions were asked about how figures were duplicated when considering how many people were on the waiting list in different areas as some applicants were likely to be on the list in more than one area. It was also asked whether or not there was room to develop a better system of providing information about waiting lists.
 - In response, an officer confirmed that 2346 applicants were on the register but the figure changed daily. It was noted that the team received approximately 27 new applications every week and had already received 950 applications this year.
 - It was explained that there was increasing demand on the team to share the information and that it was currently much easier to report figures by area as it would become much more complicated when combining areas etc. It was noted that the team's priorities needed to be considered.
 - Attention was drawn to the fact that the number of applications was not equal to the number of people as several applications included families. It was noted that the figures were shocking and that the department understood why councillors wanted to know what happened in their wards.
- It was noted that it was important that Councillors could know (with the applicant's consent) what information the department had as Councillors' intervention could often lead to providing full information to the department.
 - In response, it was noted that the law and the code of practice from the Welsh Government explained what role the Councillors could play in the process. It was accepted that there was room for them to support or advocate on behalf of their electors.
 - Officers explained that they hoped that developing the new system would facilitate the registration process for social housing which includes providing information to support the application. Although they were moving in the right direction, it was recognised that this had not yet been fully delivered.
- In response to a question about the role of salary or income threshold in the policy, it was explained that it was no longer a part of the policy and the Council had moved away from using this as the market could vary between areas. It was noted that the department considered the individual circumstances of the applicant depending on the type of areas they chose and concluded whether they had the income to comfortably meet housing needs in the private sector.
- Concern was expressed about houses that were difficult to let, for example, a four-bedroom house in rural areas, and how there was a risk for these to be let to people who were low on the list. It was asked whether it was possible to make better use of these houses, for example, by selling them to local people.
 - In response, it was accepted that there were problems in some areas and there may be room for the department to have conversations with its partners to find a solution.
 - It was noted that partners were proactive when trying to attract people to the properties but using social media and the internet to advertise properties increased the risk of drawing interest from outside the area. It was argued that this was where the policy stepped in and that applicants with a Gwynedd connection were prioritised and that it was fair to say that people without a connection who were given properties were exceptions.
- Attention was drawn to how the population was ageing and maybe some people were not in the most suitable properties for them. As a result, it was enquired how the

Housing Department collaborated with the Adults, Health and Well-being Department to ensure that people lived in properties that were suitable for them and how it monitored that there was a sufficient number of suitable housing for Gwynedd's demographic needs.

- In response, it was noted that systems were in place by partners to identify such examples of tenants and how it was possible to release this type of property for a more appropriate use.
 - When planning new properties, it was explained that a detailed analysis of needs was carried out in an attempt to meet needs across the spectrum within the development plan.
 - In terms of collaboration between departments, it was confirmed that a close relationship between departments was essential. It was explained that there was a close relationship between care and housing services as a high percentage of matters arising in the context of care related to the suitability of houses. There was cooperation between the departments in the context of housing adaptations to ensure that people could remain in their homes.
 - The fact that challenges arose in terms of the availability of funding and resources to make adaptations to houses, was recognised. Concern was expressed that there were insufficient resources to meet the need and that there was a risk for this to lead to an increase in the time people had to wait for a suitable home.
 - It was noted that the two new departments had started to collaborate on a piece of work to examine the situation in the context of housing suitability and to try to anticipate the needs over the next 25 years to see how it could plan and prepare to meet the coming need as a result of the ageing population.
- In response to a question about how a decision was made about bands, it was explained that the policy determined this.
 - There were comprehensive examples in the policy of what was considered as housing needs and what was considered as urgent housing needs. It depended on the individual's circumstances and how these were conveyed to the Housing Options Team.
 - It was explained that thresholds were clear in the policy and that the need for social housing had substantially increased and that people's needs had become more prominent and pressing since the Covid-19 period. As a result of this, it was noted that the team had had to refuse some applications in band 2.
 - It was noted again that there was a need to wait and see whether there would be any reference in the White Paper to changing the way of assessing.
 - It was explained that representatives from the Council, the housing associations and occupational therapists from the children and adults' side were part of the Specialist Housing Group and that the group sought to find solutions for cases where the traditional social housing stock did not meet the applicant's needs.
 - In response to a question asking whether anything prevented the Council from constructing more social housing, it was explained that stock had been transferred to the housing associations, but the Council would continue to lead on the work and determine where the funding would go.
 - It was noted that there were plans to build 700 additional houses before the end of the Development Plan and that the Council had already purchased 16 houses and that another five were in the pipeline.
 - In terms of the consultation following the publication of the White Paper, it was confirmed that the Council would respond formally to the consultation. It was noted that

the Government had not yet published the details of the consultation and therefore it would be difficult to say whether there was a role for the committee in the consultation.

- It was noted that today had been a good opportunity for the department to update the Committee of the changes to come.

RESOLVED

- a) **To accept and note the report.**
- b) **To ask the officers to report back to the Committee in due course on any potential implications for the policy after assessing the contents of the Welsh Government's White Paper.**
- c) **To ask the officers to consider whether the Committee should contribute to Cyngor Gwynedd's response to the consultation following the publication of the White Paper.**

6. ESTABLISHING A ONE-STOP-SHOP FOR HOUSING ENQUIRIES

The report was submitted, explaining that the intention of the One Stop Shop was to operate as a front door for all housing service enquiries and to facilitate the process for the customer. It was explained that a report on this had been submitted to the Committee in the past but work had substantially developed since that report had been submitted.

To begin, it was explained that consultation sessions had been held with key partners, including the housing associations and third sector organisations, over the past 18 months to identify opportunities to strengthen current arrangements and any potential impact on the nature of the contact that individuals would have with the organisations. Discussions had also been held with all department services to gain a better understanding of the contact with residents in the context of the enquiries the One-Stop-Shop would support.

It was noted that an initial consultation with the public had been held in January 2023 to receive feedback on the general experiences of Gwynedd residents who had contacted the housing service. It was noted that 154 responses had been received and that the majority of these had been positive. The fact that the consultation had highlighted a clear desire by the public to be able to complete an on-line application form for social housing applications was recognised, with over 70% of responses noting that this would be a positive development. It was noted that this had already been identified as a priority for the department but there was no capacity within the current system to enable people to complete applications on-line. The consultation had also highlighted that some members of the public believed there was a need to improve communication between the Council and the customer and, therefore, better on-line presence to receive information without having to pick up the phone or e-mail would be beneficial.

Another key development noted was appointing a leader for the One-Stop-Shop in February 2022 which had enabled the department to research how an appropriate structure could be put in place for the shop's operation. In light of this, it was resolved to incorporate the Housing Options Team Unit in the One-Stop-Shop as this was the work area that received the majority of enquiries by the public. It was explained that the team's structure was now nearing completion as a deputy leader had been appointed in May 2023.

It was noted that the department had researched a new system that would enable them to store comprehensive and up-to-date information in one place. It was explained that the system chosen would modernise the service offered to the public and that the ongoing programmed work included arrangements to establish the system, a trialling period and dates for relevant training. It was also explained that the department had decided to use the

FFOS internal system for the work of receiving calls and the shop's day-to-day administrative work as it was already linked to the Council website and website accounts.

In addition, it was noted that the Council had decided to establish a Single Point of Access (SPOA) for some projects and services that were funded by the Housing Support Grant. It was explained that the new system would simplify the process for individuals who were referred to services and providers that received funding from the Housing Support Grant. It was noted that the system would also allow a better overview of all the individual's needs and mean that up-to-date data could be used rather than historical information to gain a better understanding of who received support from the Housing Support Grant. It was noted that the new SPOA system was currently being trialled with internal units and that 220 Gwynedd residents had already benefited when receiving information and guidance with their relevant housing support needs.

Gratitude was expressed for the report, wishing the team well as they undertake the work of getting everything together to establish the One-Stop-Shop. It was confirmed that the beginning of the new year was the target to see the system going live.

During the discussion, the following observations were noted:

- Many Councillors expressed frustration about the complexity and time it currently took for Councillors to gain the right to discuss on behalf of electors and that there was a need to simplify the system for councillors to be able to help; it was hoped that the shop could ease things. In response, it was noted that there was no solution necessarily for the time it took to gain the right to discuss on behalf of electors as it was the law and not the officers that determined who received the right to see the information. It was reiterated that they were always willing to examine ways to try to ease things.
- The fact that establishing a new system would mean that on-line application forms could be completed was welcomed, especially as digitising forms was one of the recommendations presented by the Bevan Foundation in their report on poverty in Arfon. Confirmation was received that paper forms would continue to be available for the individuals who required them as well.
- It was enquired whether it would be possible for councillors to receive information more regularly about the applications in their wards as councillors often felt that local people knew more than them about vacant properties in their wards.
 - o A few councillors proposed that establishing a system where an automatic message was sent to councillors stating that there was a vacant property in their ward and then another message to say when the property had been let would be a better way of giving councillors an idea of what happened in their ward.
 - o It was added that being informed why the specific individual(s) had been given the property would also be useful as councillors mostly received complaints about who had received social housing.
 - o In response, the Head of Housing and Property Department noted that she understood the councillors' frustration but establishing such a system would involve a great deal of work and be a big ask for the department. Legal advice would be required about how suitable it would be to share such information with councillors.
 - o It was explained that the department did everything it could within the policy at present.
 - o It was noted that they could examine what would be possible to do to facilitate things, but it was asked for time to establish the internal system and to get the One-Stop-Shop in place before being able to consider this.

- In response to a question whether the Council had lost an element of accountability as it did not own its social housing anymore, it was noted that the new system would facilitate the arrangements for monitoring the implementation of the policy.
- The Cabinet Member was thanked for organising the housing forum that was held every few months. It was noted that the forum was a good way of sharing information and giving members an opportunity to ask questions and voice an opinion in an informal manner. It was added that it would be useful to have a forum/channel to speak to officers of the housing associations as well, and that it would be good to see representation from the housing associations attending the scrutiny committees.

RESOLVED

- a) **To accept and note the report.**
- b) **To receive a progress report within a year's time.**
- c) **To ask the Cabinet Member and the Housing Department officers to contact the housing associations to see if they could attend a meeting of the scrutiny committee and organise ways of facilitating communication between the councillors and the housing associations.**

7. GENERAL SUPPORTED ACCOMMODATION INCLUDING LEARNING DISABILITIES SERVICES, MENTAL HEALTH AND SUPPORT FOR WOMEN.

The Cabinet Member for Adults, Health and Well-being submitted the report to provide context and an update on the situation regarding supported accommodation for individuals with learning disabilities. He thanked the Senior Learning Disabilities Manager and the whole team for their work stating that it was difficult to convey in words how important was this work.

It was explained that the Welsh Government's Learning Disability Strategic Action Plan 2022 to 2026 outlined the agenda for services for individuals with learning disabilities and that the department collaborated with partners to plan and develop supported accommodation models that were suitable to meet those needs. It was noted that 70 people were currently waiting for accommodation and that these were divided into three categories: the individuals who needed priority namely accommodation within the next year; the individuals who needed accommodation within the next two years and the individuals who needed to be planned for over the next years. It was noted that the department collaborated with the Housing Department and the housing associations and that this link was essential. It was explained that work had just been completed on a new house in Groeslon which would be able to provide support for three individuals and it was hoped to be able to accommodate people by November.

It was explained that the Council had a fairly full picture of the situation in the county and that it completed continuous assessments of families/individuals who came through the system and that preparing for the future was part of everyone's package. It was also confirmed that the Learning Disability Team and the Derwen Team regularly met to discuss the situations of individuals of transition age, i.e., approximately 6 months either side of 18 years old, in order to prepare and collaborate for those children who become adults.

During the discussion, the following observations were noted:

- The members expressed their thanks for the report and the developments were welcomed.

- It was noted that the contents of the report did not match the item title on the agenda and that the item on the agenda was much broader than what had been included in the report.
 - o In response, it was noted that this was a fair enough observation confirming that the other elements were part of the picture although there was no reference to them in the report.
 - o It was explained that the element in terms of support for women tended to overlap with matters that are under the responsibility of the Housing Department and this may be an example of an area where cooperation between departments could be strengthened.

- Concern was expressed that the definition of learning disability was too narrow and there was a tendency to focus on the definition alone, without considering how the needs are very similar to mental health needs. It was noted that better cooperation between the learning disability service and the mental health service would be very beneficial rather than placing the matters in separate blocks.

- It was noted that a similar body to Care Inspectorate Wales inspected services of this type in Scotland, but this did not happen in Wales as Care Inspectorate Wales only examined the service in its entirety. As a result, it was enquired what Cyngor Gwynedd was doing to inspect the service provided at the supported accommodations to ensure quality and that there were no problems or abuse.
 - o In response, it was confirmed that the Council prioritised the safety of the individuals at the accommodations and that partners provided a very good service.
 - o It was accepted that problems could arise within the agencies and within the Council's own provision and it was noted that the Council would step in if any problems arose.
 - o It was noted that the Council sought to ensure that the monitoring work was undertaken appropriately but this was not always 100% guaranteed.
 - o The fact that the Quality Assurance Team was not as strong as it should be and that they could not visit the services, internally and externally, often enough was recognised but the team attempted to make the most of available resources. It was noted that changes were being made to ensure that the team could reach more of the provision.
 - o It was confirmed that the Inspectorate did not go in to inspect these properties specifically as they did in the context of residential homes.
 - o Therefore, it was explained that cooperation between Care Inspectorate Wales and the Quality Assurance Team was important in this context.

- Pride was expressed in seeing a reference to the plans to redevelop the Fron Deg home in Caernarfon and it was enquired whether it would be possible to receive an update on this.
 - o In response, it was recognised that the work had been in the pipeline for years and that the department was working closely on it with the Housing Department.
 - o It was explained that progress had been made. In terms of the finance, it was explained that discussions were currently ongoing. It was possible that the development would include units for rent, meaning that it would be possible to use the rent payments to repay some of the construction costs.
 - o It was noted that the department was examining the possibilities of withdrawing funding from regional and national funds for a care and housing provision.

- The intention to get people in out-of-county placements back to Gwynedd by attempting to provide more services locally, was welcomed.
- Questions were asked about the 21 individuals who were in an out-of-county placement.

- It was confirmed that the individuals were in out-of-county placements due to the expertise being offered there.
 - It was also added that some individuals had been at these placements since they were children and, therefore, considered them as their homes. It was emphasised that the most important thing was ensuring that regular discussions were held with these individuals to find out their wishes about staying or returning to Gwynedd.
- Reference was made to the plans for the Penrhos site near Pwllheli, noting frustration about how long everything had taken to fall into place. It was asked whether it was possible to receive any update.
 - In response, it was noted that the commitment of all partners in Penrhos was still in place although the partners were under heavy financial pressures.
 - It was explained that any development relied on what happened in the next few weeks in terms of planning permission. It was added that considerable work had been undertaken in the background and that things looked promising.
 - In response to a question about the collaboration taking place across the adults services, it was noted that cooperation was essentially important as several cases were relevant to more than one department. It was explained that the social workers, the occupational therapists and other individuals in the teams collaborated well with each other and they had a good working relationship with their colleagues in the Health Board.
 - The Cabinet Member for Adults, Health and Well-being added that teams collaborated effectively together and ensured that the individual was at the centre.

RESOLVED

- a) **To accept and note only the report on the situation regarding supported accommodation for individuals with learning disabilities in Gwynedd, as there is no reference to mental health and support for women in the report.**
- b) **To ask the officers to share information with the committee members about supported accommodation that is provided by the mental health service and for providing support to women.**

8. AUTISM PLAN TASK AND FINISH GROUP BRIEF

The draft brief was submitted as members of the Care Scrutiny Committee had decided at their meeting in April that they had not received sufficient information about Gwynedd's Autism Plan. In light of this, they were eager to receive more detail about the service on offer and, therefore, it was resolved to establish a Task and Finish Group.

It was decided that the Task and Finish Group would include members of the Care Scrutiny Committee and the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee, as well as representation from the Children's Department, Adults Department, Education Department and the Health Board. A request was made for three representatives from the Care Scrutiny Committee to undertake the work of the task and finish group.

During the discussion, the following observation were noted:

- It was noted that the brief was very general and although the committee's decision in April had referred to a discussion on the implementation of the plan in its entirety with the new team, there was no reference to this in the brief.

- In response, it was explained that this was an error, and the wording should correspond with the wording of what had been resolved at the committee meeting.
- It was proposed that the Task and Finish Group examined the Autism Plan in its entirety initially and maybe it would be possible to implement or examine specific matters in more detail following the group's recommendations. It was resolved that this would be a fair way of giving the new team an opportunity to make a difference and to implement its work programme.
- It was noted that more representation from the adults department would be beneficial as more than one team dealt with the matter and it was argued that it was essential for the Coordinator of the Autism Services Project to be part of the discussion.

It was explained that the Task and Finish Group would not be long, approximately 2-3 meetings at most. Councillor Jina Gwyrfai put her name forward to be a member of the Task and Finish Group. As all Committee members were not in attendance at the meeting, it was resolved that an e-mail would be sent to members of the Care Scrutiny Committee to enquire who else was interested in being part of the group. Should no names be put forward, then an invitation would be extended to the rest of the Council members. It was noted that representation from the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee would be confirmed at the committee meeting on 9 November.

RESOLVED

- a) To adopt the brief and add that the Group will look at the Autism Plan in its entirety.**
- b) To elect Councillor Jina Gwyrfai to be a part of the Autism Plan Task and Finish Group.**
- c) To engage with all members of the Care Scrutiny Committee via e-mail in order to receive two other names to be part of the task and finish group.**

The meeting commenced at 10.30am and concluded at 2.20pm.