
CARE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

20.04.18

Present: **Councillor Eryl Jones-Williams - Chairman**
 Councillor R. Medwyn Hughes - Vice-chairman

Councillors: Annwen Daniels, Anwen J. Davies, Alan Jones Evans, Sian Wyn Hughes, Elin Walker Jones, Linda Ann Wyn Jones, Cai Larsen, Beth Lawton, Dafydd Owen, Rheinallt Puw, Peter Read, Dewi Wyn Roberts, Angela Russell and Cemlyn Williams.

Officers: Marian Parry Hughes (Head of Children and Families Service), Aled Gibbard (Senior Operational Manager - Care Resources), Llinos Edwards (Senior Executive Officer), Gareth James (Member Support and Scrutiny Manager) and Glynda O'Brien (Member Support Officer).

Cabinet Members: Councillor Dilwyn Morgan

Apologies: Councillor Elfed P. Roberts

1. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

There were no declarations of personal interest.

2. URGENT ITEMS

No urgent items were received.

3. MINUTES

The Chairman signed the minutes of the meeting of this Committee held on 30 January 2018, as a true record.

4. LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

Submitted - the report of the Children and Young People Cabinet Member regarding the above and he took advantage of the opportunity to thank the Chairman and the Committee for their interest in the Service and for its support.

The report outlined the background, number of looked after children, comparison with other Counties, Court cases and information regarding the Edge of Care Team. He noted that the number of looked after children was increasing; however, he hastened to add that this was a national pattern. It was noted that the Nuffield Charity was currently carrying out a valuable review to look into care orders and hopefully, feedback would be received from that review soon. Reference was made to the comparison graphs within the reports and although progress can be seen in the total number of looked after children this year, it was noted that there were positive messages in the content of the report as well.

Members were given an opportunity to scrutinise the contents of the report and they highlighted the following points:

(a) From looking at the graph on page 17 of the report, concern was expressed that the figure of looked after children for Gwynedd appeared high compared to other Counties and they asked what could be done to reduce it. Is there a geographical pattern to figures within Gwynedd?

In response, it was noted that gradually over time the figure had increased to 227 in March and to 230 in January. It was difficult for the Service to anticipate how many referrals are received and that decisions must be made in line with the thresholds. The Edge of Care Team was established in an attempt to keep numbers down and success had been seen in changing the pattern by returning children home where it was safe to do so. It was also emphasised that comprehensive information had not been received from other counties, but it appeared that an increase had been seen in every authority in the last year and consideration also had to be given to the nature of the population of the counties.

Consideration had to be given to the fact that the Service acted to safeguard children and in the most appropriate way. Whilst acknowledging that numbers appeared high, the profile of looked after children was a factor to consider and whether the Service acted to safeguard children in the most appropriate way. It was acknowledged that an increase had been seen in the referrals received; however, the density and complexity of cases had to be borne in mind and the Committee was reassured that the Service responded promptly, in a timely way and took steps to safeguard in all cases. It was added that the Service identifies risks and responds to them by putting appropriate plans in place to safeguard children.

In terms of geographical pattern, it was noted that numbers vary across the County.

(b) How successful were looked after children educationally, and was the fact that they moved from location to location a factor that contributed towards this?

It was noted, in general, that educational results on GCSE level and A level were amongst the best in Wales due to the support received. Whilst accepting at times that children had to move from one place to another, it was ensured that this was not a concern to the Service and that the measure was 3 placements or more in terms of offering stability. Efforts were made to keep children within a school catchment area but sometimes, it was noted that this was not possible due to safety reasons and the children's welfare had to be considered. It was confirmed that every effort was made to keep them in their schools but at times this was difficult to avoid due to the failure to have a practical placement. In addition, when considering the safety of a child, consideration was given to the extended family / friends that looked after them and sometimes this was a considerable distance from their school but the child was kept within the family.

(c) For how long was the Edge of Care Team support provided?

It was noted that a specific timetable had not been determined and an example was provided where the Team had worked with the family for 18 months.

(ch) How many children had been placed outside Wales?

It was noted that children were placed in nearby counties such as Anglesey, Conwy and often, these placements were closer to the child's home. The majority of the children placed outside Wales were in specialist residential units due to the nature and density of their needs and the need for specialist therapy.

(d) In terms of the Edge of Care Team's work, it was felt from the content of the report that it was difficult for the Committee to scrutinise and measure the success of the Service.

Whilst accepting the observation, the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People noted that the Service had attached a case study to the report as an example of the work done by the Edge of Care Team but in future, it was suggested that it would be beneficial for the Scrutiny Committee to receive specialist presentations on the work of the Edge of Care Team.

Statistics were elaborated upon, and up to last April, the Edge of Care Team had worked with approximately 166 children with 66% showing progress, and of those, 63% of the children continued to live at home. There were different aspects of success and certainly, more information could be submitted in the future.

In addition, it was noted that the Service gathered the views of families and children regarding the support and that this contributed towards measuring the success of any Team.

(dd) Considering the figures in table 6 of the report, it appeared that Gwynedd had seen the greatest increase, and Denbighshire had reduced. Therefore, were different arrangements in place in Gwynedd compared with other authorities?

It was noted that the above observation was difficult to answer, but in terms of Gwynedd, it was seen that complexities were becoming more intense; however, the Head of Service was completely confident that they were responding in a timely way. Instructions and grants had been received from Government to develop Edge of Care Teams and advantages had been seen from having an Edge of Care Team for three years now, e.g. issues identified earlier. It was difficult to compare with other counties unless a survey was carried out on their arrangements; however, it was noted that every authority complied with national guidelines for safeguarding children, along with court processes. The Head of Service gave assurance that she was not overly-concerned about the figures as she knew that every child received the necessary service.

(e) Was it possible that the increase showed success and/or failures? Were examples of good practice shared between authorities?

The Head of Service noted that she did not consider the figures a failure as she provided assurance that the Service responded to children's needs and did not disregard what constituted a risk. In terms of sharing good practice, she provided assurance that this happened regularly at meetings held between the Heads of Children Services across the north. In addition, national work was taking place through the Ministerial Advisory Group and the Head of Service served as the representative of North Wales Heads of Service on this group. It was considering four work streams and one of those was the reasons why an increase had been seen in numbers. Also, it was noted that currently, six authorities had been selected by Care Inspectorate Wales to be a part of an inspection process. This would result in a report for each county and one composite national report that would make recommendations on the way forward. Therefore, assurance was provided that developmental work was progressing regionally, sub-regionally and nationally.

(f) In terms of the length of time that children were the subject of a Care Order, it was explained that this varied, however, the placements would be scrutinised every two

months. A piece of work would be completed with the Edge of Care Team and the Service would scrutinise within the teams' work processes.

(ff) How much support did a child receive in Court cases and what were the arrangements in terms of confidentiality?

It was explained that every child was open to a Social Worker and thorough work was done with the child. In addition, it was noted that a child had a guardian, namely an independent person who worked for the Court on behalf of the child. The guardian would remain with the child until the decision regarding the order would be made. In terms of children over 8 years of age, they were offered an advocacy service from independent advocates who worked for a national organisation.

In terms of confidentiality, assurance was given that arrangements were very robust. As a Head of Service, she stated that she knew every one of the looked after children. In addition, arrangements were in place where Senior Managers supervised, placement scrutiny panels were held and a different cohort of children were considered at every meeting. The Head of Service acted on the authority's behalf as Agency Decision Maker and made final decisions on adoption matters, medical treatment, holidays, fostering, etc.

(g) At grass roots level, how much good service did the child receive? Did the figures include children with disabilities? What were the children's ages?

It was confirmed that no disabled child was in a residential placement; five were in a fostering placement due to safeguarding factors. It was added that the profile in terms of young people had changed due to the support in the provision that supported families at home and there was an opportunity for families to receive respite in Hafan y Sêr.

In terms of the children's ages, it was noted that the figures included children up to 18 years old, and then arrangements were in place for individuals aged between 18 and 25 years. Of the 220, it was noted that there was a pattern with the majority of the children at a very young age under 5, and the rest were relatively dispersed across the age-range, however, she promised to send the figure profile to Councillor Elin Walker Jones in line with her wish.

(h) What steps are taken to ensure the safety of the children who are at risk, and what is the reason for the high cost of a residential placement outside Gwynedd?

It was explained, in some circumstances, that the looked after children with their parents were the riskier cases, however, assurance was given that the cases were regularly scrutinised. She added that the responsibilities were exactly the same with an access to a Social Worker, and statutory reviews were also carried out.

It was explained that the specialist residential placements for young people with profound needs were expensive and that such a provision was not available in north Wales. However, it was noted that regional work was progressing to see whether it was possible to obtain such a provision. It was noted that the costs were high due to staffing and the placements could essentially name their price as there was so much demand for a specific provision.

(i) What arrangements were available for foster / adoptive parents to support them, in particular with young people suffering from emotional problems?

It was explained that the adoption system was a regional service and thorough work was carried out in terms of assessments, identifying a plan for the child.

It was explained that the following was done:

- Providing training
- Purchasing specialist programmes from other organisations
- Workforce training
- Strengthening skills

(j) How many open cases do Social Workers have allocated to them at any given time? How was staff morale?

It was noted that Social Workers had no more than 22 cases at any given time which was comparatively low compared with some nearby counties.

The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People explained that the staff's morale was incredibly high considering that they were under pressure and had to deal with providing complex reports. To prove this, he noted that staff turnover was virtually nil with everyone staying to work in Gwynedd. From his experience of going around the teams with the Head of Service, he had seen exceptionally committed teams.

(k) What support was provided to families when shortcomings were identified?

It was explained that efforts were made to collaborate with the parents who were waiting for a service, but at times it was difficult to have urgent referrals due to pressures in the CAMHS service.

(l) For information, it was noted that a measure, namely 28 days, had to be followed in relation to a mental health assessment.

(m) Members were reminded of their responsibility as corporate parents and they were encouraged to attend the training.

Resolved: To accept, note and give thanks for the report and positive responses as noted above.

5. SUPPORTING FAMILIES STRATEGY IN GWYNEDD

Submitted - the report of the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, noting that it was a very exciting strategy. Historically, there had been successful preventative work, however, there was a need to learn from integrated working and the importance of the individual, and a prime example of this was the implementation of the Ysbyty Alltwen Scheme. It was noted that a Parliamentary Review of Health and Care in Wales referred to developing seamless care services that are convenient and close to home. The intention was to make the services much more integrated within the Council and other partners, in the hope to focus everyone's attention on early intervention and targeting families correctly and offering services that would reduce the subsequent need for much more intense intervention. It was acknowledged that there was a duty on everyone to safeguard children and young people; however, focus needed to be placed on dealing with issues early and the hope was that we would strive to develop the concept within the Council and the external partnerships. A positive step that had been made was the transfer of an officer from the Economy Department to the Children and Families Department and this provided additional capacity within the Department.

Members were given an opportunity to ask questions and the following points were highlighted:

(a) Reference was made to the Families First programme and the acknowledgement that the programme had been successful and that the input of the third sector had been essential, e.g. Citizens' Advice Bureau. If the programmes were successful, why did the model have to be changed?

The Head of Service explained that the Government had decided to abolish the grants to the third sector for the purposes of developing financial literacy. During the transitional year, Gwynedd was the only authority that funded last year, but whilst accepting that it had been a success, it was not possible to extend the resource due to the lack of financial resources and the national guidance. It was added that this did not mean that families could not be referred to the Citizens' Advice Bureau; however, the money used to ensure that they were given priority.

In terms of the proposed model, a lot was learnt from the advantages and the benefits over the past five years, that needs were not being met, specifically families where the children were teenagers, low-level mental health, speech and language delay and homelessness issues. The intention was to have services in their place, and target families so that it was possible to identify children who came into care and put a team around them, i.e. assessment of needs and realising that there was a need to recommission and target a different cohort of families.

(b) Did the Education Department have input as a result of problems with children's lack of skills?

In response, the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People confirmed that Education was one of the essential partners and that support had already been received from the Department. Also, fortunately, it was noted that the health service was a very strong partner in Gwynedd and was a huge hub for the Children and Families Service.

The Head of Service added that speech and language was one of the main priorities. It was acknowledged across the age ranges, including teenagers, that it affected their confidence, behaviour and ability to reach their potential. The intention was to extend the provision across the County and to collaborate with the Health Board, the third sector, as well as the Education Department in order to better identify the families.

(c) The strategy was welcomed and it was asked whether there was an intention to work with Housing Associations?

The Head of Service confirmed that more attention needed to be given to the above in its entirety, and reference was made to a pilot example of working with Housing Wardens in Maesgeirchen, Bangor, who had a wealth of key information.

(ch) Whilst welcoming the report, more information was needed and they were reminded of the need to address the needs of children with disabilities.

The Head of Service noted that the vision was presented before the Committee and that she was very grateful to the Leadership Team for the support to move forward. The task of the new officer would be to refine the plan and collaborate with the partnership and an update could be presented on the developments in a year's time.

(d) The importance of the trans-agency collaboration and how successful the model had been, was noted. Hopefully, the new youth workers would be able to contribute to the above strategy.

The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People explained that the Youth Service only reached 25% of youths, noting that there were missed young people in the County. Hopefully, the new model in youth work would reach out so that more young people were reached, however, in terms of the Children and Families Service, any additional partnership was welcomed.

The meeting commenced at 10:30am and concluded at 12:05pm.

CHAIR