

CARE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE THURSDAY, 25 NOVEMBER 2021

Present: Councillor Eryl Jones-Williams (Chair)
Councillor Angela Russell (Vice-chair)

Councillors: Alan Jones Evans, Berwyn Parry Jones, Linda Ann Jones, Beth Lawton, Dafydd Owen and Dewi Wyn Roberts.

Officers present:

Bethan Adams (Scrutiny Advisor), Llywela Haf Owain (Senior Language and Scrutiny Advisor) and Sioned Mai Jones (Democracy Services Officer).

Also in attendance:

Councillor Dilwyn Morgan (Cabinet Member for Children and Supporting Families), Aled Gibbard (Senior Operational Manager - Care Resources), Helen Fon Owen (Senior Learning Disabilities Manager - North) and Alun Gwilym Williams (Senior Learning Disabilities Manager - South).

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Menna Baines, Beca Brown, Annwen Daniels, Anwen J Davies, Gareth Tudor Morris Jones, Olaf Cai Larsen, Linda Morgan, Peter Read and Elwyn Jones (ex-officio member). Also, apologies were received from Marian Parry Hughes (Head of Children and Supporting Families Department) and Councillor Dafydd Meurig (Cabinet Member for Adults, Health and Well-being).

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

Councillor Dewi Wyn Roberts noted that his relative was currently receiving an autism assessment.

Councillor Linda Ann Jones noted that she used to be the director of Seren but she had now resigned.

The members were not of the opinion that they were prejudicial interests, and did not withdraw from the meeting during the discussion on the items.

3. URGENT ITEMS

On behalf of the Committee, the Chair wished to extend condolences to Marian Parry Hughes and her family for their recent sudden bereavement.

4. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous meeting of this Committee held on 30 September 2021 as a true record.

5. AUTISM STRATEGY

The report on the Autism Plan 2021-23 was submitted by the Cabinet Member for Children and Supporting Families. The Cabinet Member elaborated on the content of the report noting that this Plan was one of the Council's improvement priority projects, namely to ensure that Families and Children with autism had access to the support they needed to thrive.

It was added that work on the Plan had continued during the recent difficult period and the opportunity was taken to thank Council Officers for their work along with other partners including the Health Board. It was noted that the Health Board had recognised the importance of this Plan in the midst of recent busyness and had played a key role to bring the Plan together.

It was reported that the Strategy was innovative, this was confirmed by the specialist Advisor who had noted that what Gwynedd and partners were doing was progressive and leading the way for others. It was recognised by the Senior Operational Manager that the work of the Learning Disabilities Senior Managers within the Adults Department was essential as autism transitioned to this Department as well as the Children's Department.

It was summarised by noting that there was a desire for this Strategy to be a live Strategy that could evolve in accordance with any legislation and the strategy would be reviewed regularly. Members were invited to ask questions and offer observations.

During the discussion, the following observations were submitted by members:

- The Autism Plan 2021-23 was welcomed by Members. It was noted that it was now important to look ahead towards the Plan's future.
- It was suggested that autism service users and their families should be consulted on the Plan and that regular feedback should be received from them about the service.
- It was questioned what role would the Education Department have in the Strategy as this had not been highlighted in the Plan and it was enquired what would be the intervention level of the Education Department. It was believed that it should be ensured that collaboration with the Education Department was highlighted in the Plan.
- It was expressed that many parents were concerned about the time it took for children to be diagnosed with the condition and about the time to wait for an assessment. It was asked whether it would be possible to do something to improve this.
- There was a desire to receive an information session for Councillors in order to improve understanding of the field. It was reiterated that this training should be held before April 2022.
- It was added that it should be ensured that suitable training was available for all, including Council staff, in order for them to be aware of trends e.g. that women could hide the condition better than men.
- The importance of all School staff members receiving training so that they could identify the condition early, was reiterated. The Senior Operational Manager acknowledged that this was an important point that would receive appropriate attention.
- It was enquired whether the number of people with the condition was increasing. It was also stated that it would have been useful to see more input from families during the consultation. It was suggested that regular feedback should be received from service users and their families in order to review whether or not this Plan had improved their experiences.
- Reference was made to the three posts and the amount of money that had been identified within the Plan for implementation; it was enquired whether these posts were sufficient to respond to requirements.
- It was asked if there was a designated staff member for autism in every School across the county.
- It was questioned whether or not there was a card or something similar available for people with the condition to show that they had been diagnosed should any difficulty manifest itself.

In response to the above observations and questions from members, it was noted:

- Just over 100 children had been identified with additional learning needs where autism had been noted as part of that. There was an intention for the Education Department to join the Project Board and their contribution would become apparent here. They would feed information into the Board's discussions and steer the direction of the Plan, it was noted that this work was only in its early stages. In addition, it was noted that this Strategy would be inclusive of every Council Department where there would be potential to spot the condition. It was reported that the Co-ordinator would ensure the ability to identify young people sooner, especially in the transition age.
- There were different arrangements for Adults and Children but long waiting lists for child assessments had maximised the need for support and information for parents who were awaiting assessments. It was reported that there was a need to improve this aspect in order to alleviate the concerns of parents as they went through the process. The contribution of the Health Board towards the Plan would manifest itself here. Continuous review would be essential as well as training and maximising the skills of more staff to be able to provide the support.
- In terms of the observation about the impact assessment, where it had been noted that women were less likely to receive a diagnosis as they were better at concealing their symptoms, it was elaborated that this trend derived from national research. The Senior Operational Manager noted that there was no sound knowledge at present about some matters, with the exception of national messages. It was hoped that raising awareness and improving training would enable people to recognise the signs and symptoms of autism. It was noted that the training programme was currently being developed and that this was an important message to include. The training would have different tiers, which would include general training for staff across the Local Authority and more specialist training e.g. for Education Department staff.
- It was estimated that 400 children under 18 years old have the condition in Gwynedd. It is not anticipated that there will be an increase in the condition in the near future. The importance of coordinating and drawing the various aspects together was added; it was noted that this had previously been missing. It was hoped that better data, profile and contributions could be seen from different places, which would improve the knowledge and ability to plan services for the future. The role of the Co-ordinator would be central to gather information and incorporate those messages into the Plan.
- The posts, subject to the outcome of the Cabinet meeting next week, would be permanent posts. It was noted that these posts would not address the Schools element as arrangements were already in place for this within the ALN (additional learning needs) Unit. It could not be ensured that the three posts would meet all needs, more needs could be highlighted but the posts would certainly meet some of the needs. Continuous review would be key. As a result of the Co-ordinator post, it was added that there would be a particular person to drive the autism work forward and, therefore, it was hoped that things would progress faster.
- There was no designated person for autism in every School but rather a designated person for ALN in every School across the Council and the Senior Operational Manager felt that these arrangements were sufficient. In response to a further question, should these staff receive additional training on the signs of autism, the Senior Operational Manager noted that this should be followed up and he welcomed the observation.

- A card was available to show that a person had a learning disability, which included autism, it was explained that the National Autism Service could provide this. Also, the card was available on-line to download and print.

In response to the Members' concerns regarding the time it had taken to develop the Strategy, it was noted that ownership of the subject was one clear reason for the delay. It was elaborated that Autism was covered in more than one field with responsibilities by the Health Board as well as Local Authorities. The subject had not been coordinated in a way that encouraged collaboration or had not come together in one place. It was recognised that the process was slow; it was reported that lessons needed to be learnt in order to improve and this was the commitment for the future.

In response to a question on how regular the Plan would be reviewed, it was noted that it was a requirement in accordance with the Code of Practice, to review the Plan annually. It was stated that it was hoped that one could reflect on the work undertaken this year and that the Plan could be matured for the future. It was added that there were initial discussions on Government level regarding the introduction of a performance monitoring framework in 2022/23. There would be a second part to this Plan in terms of the Government's action plan. The annual review of the Plan was welcomed by Members adding that there was a strong desire to receive an update before April 2022.

In response to a further enquiry regarding potential successes in other counties, it was noted that other counties were in similar situations if not more vulnerable than Gwynedd in terms of very long waiting lists; this had been highlighted at the National meetings. The Senior Operational Manager added that he was confident that the Co-ordinator would give more focus to the work and have the capacity to drive the work forward. It was noted that it was intended to examine the role of the third sector in April 2022 after undertaking some of the initial work; there would be an opportunity at the time to examine any opportunities to attract funding.

To conclude, the Senior Operational Manager noted that he was very open to further scrutiny at any time; he would welcome the opportunity to share the evidence of any progress achieved.

The Scrutiny Committee was thanked for its support. The Cabinet Member reported that the Unit had been willing to take responsibility and learn from their shortcomings and it was believed that this Strategy was a very positive way forward. It was added that collaboration was essential; where the service derived from did not matter to families but rather that the service existed and was there to deliver for Families and Children.

RESOLVED:

- (a) To accept the report that provided an overview of the Autism Plan 2021-23.**
- (b) To send correspondence to the Cabinet recommending that it supported and approved the Plan and the bid for continuous funding at its meeting on 30 November, 2021, noting the main observations of the Care Scrutiny Committee.**
- (c) For Members to receive an update by April on what has been achieved.**

The meeting commenced at 10:30 and concluded at 11:45.

CHAIR