

CARE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE THURSDAY, 17 MARCH 2022

Present: Councillor Eryl Jones-Williams (Chair)

Councillors: Menna Baines, Beca Brown, Alan Jones Evans, Berwyn Parry Jones, Gareth Tudor Morris Jones, Linda Ann Jones, Linda Morgan, 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).

Present for item 5:

Councillor Dafydd Meurig (Cabinet Member for Adults, Health and Well-being), Aled Davies (Head of Adults, Health and Well-being Department) and Mannon Trappe (Senior Safeguarding, Quality Assurance and Mental Health Manager).

Present for item 6:

Councillor Craig ab Iago (Cabinet Member for Housing and Property), Carys Fôn Williams (Head of Housing and Property Department) and Hedd Tomos (Housing Supply Manager).

Present for item 7:

Councillor Dilwyn Morgan (Cabinet Member for Children and Supporting Families), Marian Parry Hughes (Head of Children and Supporting Families Department), Aled Gibbard (Senior Operational Manager - Care Resources) and Mel Panther (Fostering Team Manager).

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Angela Russell (Vice-chair), Annwen Daniels and Anwen J. Davies.

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

No declarations of personal interest or relevant dispensations were received.

3. URGENT ITEMS

None to note.

The Chair wished to thank Councillor Cai Larsen for his service on this Committee and Councillor Dewi Roberts was welcomed back.

4. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous meeting of this Committee held on 3 February, 2022 as a true record.

5. GWYNEDD MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE

The report was submitted, which updated members on the work of the Mental Health Service and the developments for 2022-23. It was noted that the service was multi-disciplinary and cross-departmental. It was added that the Health Board led the service and that it was a strong and developmental partnership.

It was added that the service worked with individuals over the age of eighteen. Most of the individuals have capacity and have received the service optionally. The Mental Health Project, which was one of the developmental plans in the service's work programme, was reported upon. It was noted that the Adults, Health and Well-being Department had commissioned a consultant to scrutinise the resources and service within the primary provision. It was hoped that plans and proposals would emerge from this work and it was hoped that those recommendations could be brought to the Care Scrutiny Committee in future.

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

- Concern was expressed regarding how individuals accessed the Mental Health Service; one case was reported where no referral had been made on behalf of the individual. Cases were also mentioned where individuals had only been given tablets by GPs and that no further assistance had been offered.
- It was added that the lack of face-to-face appointments with doctors caused concerns, especially for those who did not use programmes such as Zoom. Members expressed that they were pleased that things seemed to be improving and face-to-face appointments were being restored.
- It was stated that the number of referrals during 2021 was high; it was asked how these figures compared with previous years.
- It was asked how the Department was addressing the recruitment difficulties and staff shortages due to absences and vacant posts which contributed to waiting lists.
- An observation was made regarding the problems in the Mental Health field and within the Health Board and concern was expressed that the Council was very dependent on the Health Board's services. It was questioned whether the Council had expressed the problems being experienced and whether the Council was adequately challenging the Health Board. The Council wished to acknowledge these problems and thought it should have been identified in the report.
- It was questioned whether adequate support was being given to individuals who were experiencing difficulties with their mental health.
- Concerns were raised regarding the mental well-being of children and whether this would lead to long-term mental health problems; it was asked whether, for example, an additional resource had been made available in schools to deal with this.
- Thanks were expressed for the report, noting that a further update would be welcomed.

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

- Referrals to the service were usually made by the GPs. It was reported that, on occasion, individuals found it difficult to get an appointment with their GP. In such cases, other employees who supported individuals may be asked to make the referral. It was reported that members were welcome to contact the Senior Safeguarding, Quality Assurance and Mental Health Manager directly if they wished to have a further discussion regarding specific cases.
- There were no referral figures to compare with other years but the number of referrals was generally stable. It was noted that the number of referrals had decreased at the start of the pandemic, but was now stable. The number of referrals was predicted to increase due to the impact of the pandemic.
- Recruitment was a problem, especially in the south of the county. Recruitment was also identified as a problem for the Health Board, which has an impact on the

Council's service as the two teams were integrated. It was explained that regular discussions were taking place and that campaigns across the north were trying to tackle this problem. It was added that a task group had been set up within the Department to look at recruitment and try to attract more people to the posts.

- The service understood members' frustrations with the Mental Health field and the Health Board in particular. It was reported that the Council focused on parts of the Mental Health Service and that this contribution needed to be understood in the first place. Once the Council was clear about its strengths, then it would be easier to challenge some aspects of the Health Board's contribution.
- In response to an observation regarding the Council doing adequate preventative work and taking timely steps; it was noted that this was part of the additional work that had commenced, and that the work would be developed over the coming months. It was hoped that the provision could be strengthened and that plans could be put in place to respond to demand.
- It was fair to acknowledge that more needed to be done, but the biggest challenge was finding out what was going to make the biggest difference and identifying the scale of the task. It was noted that ideas existed but those ideas needed to be brought together in order to put a suitable and appropriate plan in place to fill the gaps highlighted by members.
- It was noted that the report submitted was a report on adult mental health services. This service did not cater for the children's field. It was emphasised that there was collaboration between the adults and children's services on mental health matters but that the main responsibilities lay with the Children and Supporting Families Department and the Education Department. It was added that the collaboration between Departments looked at the potential demand on adult mental health services in the long term.

The Committee expressed its desire for the Mental Health Service to provide a further report on the findings of the research being undertaken. It was hoped that this work would be completed within the next 2-3 months.

The Chair and former Chair expressed their thanks to the Head of Adults, Health and Well-being and the Cabinet Member for their collaboration during the past term. Thanks were expressed to all officers within the Department.

RESOLVED:

- a) **To accept the report that provided an overview of the work of the Mental Health Service and developments for 2022-23.**
- b) **To request another report within 3-4 months on the research findings of the 'Mental Health Project' that will have been undertaken.**

6. HOUSING ACTION PLAN

The report was submitted by the Head of Housing and Property Department and she offered an update on some of the main projects of the Housing Action Plan, which was approved by the Cabinet in December 2020.

An update was provided on the progress made since the adoption of the Plan in April 2021, which included building 89 social housing and bringing 41 empty houses back into use. An overview of individual projects and fields was received, detailing the progress made and the steps being taken.

Reference was made to the challenges being faced by the Department, such as the significant increase in the number of homelessness presentations received, and an outline was given of the developments planned to address these challenges. Members' attention was drawn to the One Stop Shop project and the next stage of identifying alternative models for the operation of the unit. After gathering information and carrying out a consultation a report shall be presented on the various options.

The importance of communication and reporting on the successes of the Housing Action Plan was emphasised, adding that a page had already been set up on the Members' Intranet to present updates to members. It was added that the Department would welcome the opportunity to return to the Scrutiny Committee in future to provide a further update on the progress of the Plan. Members were given an opportunity to ask questions and offer observations.

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

- Thanks were expressed for the detailed report and the ambitious Plan which identified and responded to the county's housing problems.
- Appreciation was expressed for the work of the Department and pride was expressed in what had been achieved to date. The members looked forward to seeing what could be achieved in future.
- It was noted that a number of houses in the Blaenau Ffestiniog area were not up to standard; however, the houses were rented out to residents as there were no better quality properties available. It was asked whether Officers within the Housing Unit continued to visit private rental properties in order to check their standard and the cost of rent as they had done in the past. It was questioned whether the Plan addressed unsuitable housing.
- It was asked how the Council worked with Rent Smart Wales. It was thought that this organisation set expected standards but that people were accepting lower quality housing due to a shortage of properties in the county.
- It was asked what the reasons were for the low number of responses received when over 300 letters were sent to the owners of empty houses across the county. Further questions were asked about when the 41 empty properties were brought back into use.
- An observation was made that many more of the empty houses grants for first time buyers were given to applicants from the Arfon area compared to applicants from the south of the county. It was asked whether there was a waiting list for Meirionnydd or a reason why people from the south of the county were not applying for these grants. It was believed that more should be done to promote these grants in the south of the county.
- It was observed that people must be facing homelessness within 56 days before being identified as being at risk of homelessness but that notices to leave were sometimes given 6 months in advance. It was asked what the department was doing to try to help these people before the 56-day period.
- Frustration was expressed in regards to contacting and receiving responses from some of the Housing Associations. It was noted that members would like to know what social housing was going to become vacant but that this information was not usually provided by the Housing Associations.
- It was stated that some members were waiting a long time to receive a response to their enquiries from the Housing Options Team and had experienced difficulties in contacting the team. It was noted that the public had also experienced this

frustration and it was felt that there was a lack of communication from the team. The Head of Housing and Property Department's views were sought on the situation.

- Reference was made to the statutory imposition imposed by the Welsh Government during the pandemic period, which stated that Local Authorities should house anyone presenting as homeless and it was believed that this was challenging for the Homelessness Unit. It was asked whether this had been reflected in the graph on page 20 of the pack, and what would happen if the Government enacted this Act.
- It was felt that promoting the Housing Action Plan was important and that members had a role to play. It was suggested that members should promote the Plan through their Community and Town Councils.
- It was believed that very good progress had been made since the adoption of the Plan. It was reported that there were various encouraging figures in the report. Members wished to receive further information, i.e. where the 89 social housing had been built.

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

- The old rent setting system no longer existed. It was noted that there were approximately 9,000 private rented housing in Gwynedd and that only a small number of these landlords were causing problems. The Head of the Housing and Property Department reported that a team of officers within the service were responsible for auditing housing standards. Members were asked to contact the service if they were aware of any problematic housing. It was added that the team was available to undertake inspections at any time.
- The Housing Department worked very closely with Rent Smart Wales. It was noted that 90% of houses for rent in Gwynedd were registered with Rent Smart Wales. It was added that the organisation gave recognition that a check had been conducted on a person (landlord) but was reliant on the Council to ensure that the property's standards were maintained. It was reported that property standards did not have to be disclosed in order to be registered with Rent Smart Wales. Members were encouraged to contact the Housing Department if they had concerns about specific property standards.
- The lack of response to the letters sent to the owners of empty houses was not surprising to the Unit. It was reported that the exercise of sending letters to owners was a frequent occurrence and that the response was always poor; the Unit was not sure why. It was noted that there were a number of reasons why owners chose to keep their houses empty, these ranged from sentimental to other reasons such as families keeping the houses for their children. It was added that the 300 letters were only sent across the coast of the county to see what the response would be; the next step would be to send letters to the owners of empty houses in the whole county, which would be around 1,200. It was hoped that a better response would be received to these letters. It was added that the 41 vacant houses that had already come back into use were as a result of a combination of a number of schemes across the county, e.g. first-time buyer loans and loans to bring houses back to standard.
- The same message was being disseminated across the county and the empty houses grants for first-time buyers were available to all. It was reported that there was no waiting list and perhaps the scheme needed further promotion so that people were aware of its existence; the Unit would act on this.
- The Homelessness Service received cases of homelessness before the statutory period of 56 days. Cases were accepted when the notice was served, usually within 6 months; a lot of preventative work was done during this period before the end of

the 56 days. It was reported that the service was able to communicate with landlords and seek alternative housing for its clients. It was added that Gwynedd Council was one of the top four Councils across the country for taking steps to prevent homelessness.

- The Council had an open relationship with the Housing Associations, which included regular contact. Members were welcome to contact the Housing Department if they had difficulty receiving a response from the Housing Associations in Gwynedd. It was added that informing members of when social housing became vacant was not part of the process of letting social housing. The Cabinet Member noted that he was also keen for the Housing Associations to inform members when social housing became vacant. It was believed that Housing Associations should be asked to provide this information at the beginning of the new Council term. It was noted that this was part of the principles of information sharing that the Department was trying to achieve with the One Stop Shop and Members' Intranet.
- There had been a significant increase in applications for social housing during the year, which had resulted in delays in some cases in terms of responding to enquiries from Members and the public. It was explained that the Unit was looking at solutions to a number of enquiries, e.g. the Unit was looking at options to develop an app so that applicants could access their applications directly. Apologies were expressed for the delay. It was added that the team had been under pressure and it was hoped that the situation could be addressed through the One Stop Shop and improved collaboration. It was noted that other developments were in the pipeline to provide members with direct information via the Intranet, where recent activities in a specific area might be viewed. It was hoped that this development would become operational once the One Stop Shop was established.
- There had been an increase in the number of homelessness presentations due to the fact that the definition of 'homelessness' changed during the pandemic. In the past, if people were not in priority need then the Homelessness Service did not accept them. Following Government guidance that all people presenting as homeless should be accepted and housed, this led to a significant increase in numbers. It was reported that the numbers continued to increase, which was very worrying. It was thought that the increased numbers were due to private landlords giving tenants notices to leave because they wanted to sell their homes or convert them into holiday homes. It was also noted that there had been an increase in the number of relationship break-ups during the pandemic. It was anticipated that the numbers would not decrease in future and that the Government's requirement had been made permanent.

In response to a member's shrewd observation regarding the number of people in Gwynedd who had received support to live locally to date, it was reported that the figure of 1,163 (as noted on the Members' Intranet) was correct. It was noted that the figure of 1,754 noted in the report was correct for the Housing Strategy, which had been operational since 2019, but that the figure of 1,163 was relevant for the Housing Action Plan, which had been operational since 2021.

It was added that members were encouraged to refer to the Members' Intranet, which would be updated regularly by the Housing Department. To conclude, the Committee was thanked for all its scrutiny work over the years, for their positive and constructive feedback, and for their involvement in the development process of the Housing Action Plan.

Thanks were expressed to the Head of the Housing Department and the Cabinet Member for their work, as well as the Department's officers.

RESOLVED:

- a) **To accept the report, noting the observations made during the meeting.**
- b) **To request a further update next year to the Care Scrutiny Committee on the Housing Action Plan.**

7. GWYNEDD'S FOSTERING STRATEGY

The Cabinet Member for Children and Supporting Families gave a foreword to the report, noting that it was a pleasure to present an update on Gwynedd's Fostering Strategy. He took advantage of the opportunity to give thanks for the input received to develop this strategy locally and nationally; and to thank the fostering families for their exceptional and dedicated work. It was added that the Head of Gwynedd's Children and Supporting Families Service led on the regional strategy on behalf of the authorities and was a member of the national steering group.

The report was submitted by the Senior Operational Manager - Care Resources, noting that it was a follow up to a report previously presented to the Committee on the National Fostering Strategy. It was further noted that a National team had been established as an extension of the National Adoption Service which would continue to provide focus on this work. It was reported that the six regional Managers conveyed the messages locally and ensured that the work programme was progressing within their regions and counties.

The fostering situation in Gwynedd was reported, noting that the need for new placements varied from year to year; for this reason, attracting new foster carers was one of the main aims of the fostering framework. The purpose of the fostering service in Gwynedd was to provide a safe and happy home for Gwynedd's children and the team's priorities were highlighted in order to meet the purpose.

It was reported that there were ten social workers within the team. Four now focused on the kinship foster carers and provided a clear focus on the work, while the other six social workers supported and assessed general foster carers. It was noted that the Fostering Team Manager acted as the Fostering Development Manager across the north region on some days of the week, and as a result, two Practice Leaders led on both work areas. It was added that a Regional Marketing Officer had been appointed, who was employed by Gwynedd and served the six authorities across the north. The Officer would undertake further work on developing a recruitment and marketing strategy across the region.

It was added that it was important to find out how many carers would be needed to fulfil the needs of children in Gwynedd. The Fostering Team Manager added that Gwynedd needed to look at achieving a 25% increase in foster carers in order to remain in a stable position; this showed how vital the recruitment activities were.

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

- The Unit was thanked for their good work and appreciation was expressed to the foster parents.
- It was thought that Foster Wales' branding was eye catching and stood out on social media.
- The team's hard work in responding to the recruitment challenge was acknowledged and the appointment of the Regional Marketing Officer was welcomed. An observation was made on the slight reduction in the number of carers due to retirements, but that it was encouraging to hear about the marketing and recruitment work being undertaken.

- It was asked whether it was more difficult to find foster parents to foster older children, for example, teenagers compared to younger children, and whether there was a campaign to attract foster parents for older children. It was also asked whether it was more difficult to find Welsh speaking foster parents and whether there was a specific recruitment process for Welsh speaking children.
- It was asked whether there were new recruitment ideas as a result of being part of the National strategy.
- It was stated that there was a cluster of foster carers around the Bala area who were supportive of each other and had developed very naturally. It was wondered whether there was room to replicate this in other areas. Some members wished to receive an update on this in future.
- It was reported that the application process to become foster parents had a reputation of being hard, demanding and time consuming for applicants. Concern was expressed that this discouraged applicants and prevented them from registering. It was asked how the Unit would respond to such an allegation and encourage and support applicants.
- It was noted that members would like to hear directly from those who were fostering about their experiences and that it would be beneficial to raise awareness about fostering amongst members. It was suggested that a presentation to the Full Council would be beneficial so that all members could understand more about the benefits of fostering and how members could assist in the recruitment effort.
- It was asked whether foster parents in Gwynedd received less payments compared to foster parents in other areas.

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

- It was more difficult to recruit foster parents for older children, but the team was fortunate to have experienced carers who have much to offer older children. It was noted that the team was trying to highlight the need for foster parents for older children, but was not quite sure how to attract the desired numbers. It was reported that if the team could not meet the needs internally within the provision, then they would look at the independent private sector. It was added that this was not the aim.
- In Gwynedd, focus was placed on recruiting first language Welsh foster parents but challenges existed due to the demographic of those who tend to foster. These traditional trends included people who had retired early or moved to the area and were in a financial position to be able to foster. It was noted that efforts were being made to be more flexible and supportive; recent successes were reported where more younger parents in their thirties were registered as foster parents. Gwynedd was believed to be slightly better than the National trends in recruiting a variety of foster parents.
- The emphasis was not so much on discovering new ideas but rather on marketing; this was where the role of the Regional Marketing Officer will manifest itself, which was to look at how to market existing ideas. It was believed that emphasis needed to be placed on how to market strategically with a particular focus on who was to be targeted demographically and geographically; it was then hoped to be able to recruit better.
- The situation in Bala had developed organically without much intervention from the Unit. It was reported that a very close community of foster carers had developed in the area with some support and encouragement from the fostering team. It was noted that this was something that the team and the Marketing Officer were eager to look at to find out how the contacts within the community had developed. A case study would

be completed by talking to the area's foster parents. It was mentioned that there were plans before Covid-19 to arrange meetings for foster parents to meet each other; it was intended to revisit these arrangements as well as organising a Fostering Day in the summer for foster parents, children and Officers. It was added that one of the best resources in terms of marketing was the foster parents and there were plans to make more use of the foster parents, e.g. through local and regional campaigns. The Marketing Officer will look at these opportunities.

- The regulations within the Act meant that the Unit had to carry out thorough checks, which included looking at the background of potential foster parents to ensure the safety of the children. It was noted that the Officers carrying out the assessments explained the process clearly to the applicants so that they were aware of the process. It was noted that the team were looking at the qualities and characteristics of individuals that make them suitable for fostering. It was added that the process could be lengthy with assessments taking approximately 6 months to complete. It was explained that the DBS checks could slow down the process, but due to recent changes, these checks could be completed online which sped up the process a bit. It was reported that the Officers were trying to respond to any enquiry by explaining the requirements and respecting the sensitivity of the process and how challenging it was for prospective foster parents. In addition, it was noted that all social workers in the team had gained an additional DDP qualification and that improvements had recently been made in the time it took to assess applications with some being completed within 4-5 months.
- All members were required to complete Corporate Parenting training and it was noted that it was a good idea to add the experiences of foster parents to this training. It was asked whether it was possible to get a young person to attend the training to share their experiences and perspective of being in foster care in Gwynedd. An opportunity was taken to encourage members to attend the Corporate Parenting training as it provided an opportunity to understand what it was like to be a foster parent. It was added that there was an intention to include information about Corporate Parenting on the Members' Intranet and any ideas were welcomed from members on the kind of information that should also be included.
- There were two elements to fostering payments, which included a Fostering Allowance and additional payments. It was noted that Gwynedd met the minimum fostering allowance set by the Welsh Government. It was added that the variation was usually due to additional payments based on experience and skills and the training that foster parents were willing to complete. This was not a statutory payment to be given, but instead was used to try and attract and retain foster parents. It was explained that one of the biggest challenges in developing a National framework was the large variation between the 22 Authorities in terms of the additional payments. In Gwynedd, there are 3 levels based on training. It was added that there was a variation in Gwynedd amongst the foster carers that were related to the children with some choosing not to undertake the training, and consequently, not receiving the additional payment whilst others received it; therein lies the discrepancy.

In response to a further observation regarding the age of foster parents that the Unit was trying to target in their recruitment effort; it was noted that the Unit did not look directly at age and background, but rather the quality and merits of the person and what they could offer to the children. It was explained that having a wide spectrum of people and backgrounds was invaluable to suit the diverse needs of the children.

The Cabinet Member reported that he had had the opportunity over the years to chat over a cup of tea with the foster parents and children; he noted that this experience was very

positive with happy, positive and encouraging stories being told by the children with consistent messages of thanks to the foster parents.

An opportunity was taken to thank Councillor Menna Baines specifically for her contribution and work on the Fostering Panel. Thanks were also expressed to Councillors Beth Lawton and Angela Russell, who had represented this Committee at the Performance Challenging meetings, for their contribution over the years. Lastly, Councillors Dewi Roberts and Eryl Jones-Williams were thanked for Chairing the Care Scrutiny Committees during the Council term. It was added that the Care Scrutiny Committee had been an integral part of the Children's Department and its work, and thanks were expressed for the constructive contribution of the Committee.

To conclude, the Committee expressed its thanks to the Head of Department and the Cabinet Member for Children and Supporting Families and all Officers for their collaboration and willingness to discuss over the years.

RESOLVED:

- a) **To accept the report and to note the information.**
- b) **To recommend that the Department invited foster carers and a child to the Corporate Parent training that will be held in future.**

The meeting commenced at 10:30 and concluded at 13:15

CHAIR