

Joint inspection with a focus on safeguarding in Gwynedd Council

The purpose of this inspection was to evaluate developments in Gwynedd Local Authority's safeguarding arrangements since September 2023.

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Joint inspection with a focus on safeguarding in Gwynedd Council by Estyn, His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education, and Training in Wales, and Care Inspectorate Wales.

Date of inspection: November 2025

Context:

In September 2023, the headteacher of Ysgol Friars, Bangor was arrested on suspicion of sexual abuse and exploitation of a school pupil. Later, on 15th May 2024, he was found guilty of sexual offences against 4 female victims and was imprisoned for 17 years. In October 2025, an extended child practice review commissioned by the North Wales Child Safeguarding Board '**Our Bravery Brought Justice 2024**' (https://www.northwalessafeguardingboard.wales/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/30.10.25-FINAL-ENGLISH-CPR-REPORT-_.pdf) was published. The purpose of this inspection was to evaluate developments in Gwynedd Local Authority's safeguarding arrangements since September 2023. The inspection team considered one key question:

How well are children protected from individuals who may pose a risk to them and when concerns are raised about those who care for them or work with them, either in a paid or voluntary role?

There were four specific focus areas under consideration:

- The voice of the child
- Multi-agency joint working
- Governance and leadership
- Training and support

The findings within this report cover a broad evidence base and a comprehensive range of activities. These are as follows:

- A meeting with the independent chair of the Gwynedd Recovery Board
- A meeting with the joint chairs of the North Wales Child Safeguarding Board
- A meeting with members of the education and social care scrutiny boards
- Meetings with practitioners, staff, officers, managers, senior officers, elected members, leaders of scrutiny committees (a total of 20 meetings)
- Visits to 6 schools
- Workshops with children and young people in schools
- A meeting with Gwynedd Youth Forum

- A meeting with a group of school governors
- Case tracking meetings with statutory agencies and partner agencies
- A workshop with a group of child and family practitioners
- A workshop with a group of managers
- A questionnaire for children and families services staff
- A questionnaire for partner agencies
- A questionnaire for Gwynedd school headteachers
- Scrutiny of sample files (24 child safeguarding cases under Section 3 and Section 5 of the Wales Safeguarding Procedures for the period between 1/09/24 and 30/09/25)
- Scrutiny of all relevant policies
- Scrutiny of the terms of reference of a wide range of forums and panels at all levels
- Scrutiny of minutes of meetings at departmental, local, cross-authority and regional level
- Evaluation of training and professional development resources

Areas for improvement

1. Establish a corporate policy on the voice of the child and align arrangements for listening to the voice of the child under the Wales Safeguarding Procedures to ensure consistency across the education department and the children and families services; use messages from children and young people's forums to influence strategic planning directly
2. Establish corporate quality assurance arrangements that measure the impact of child safeguarding and protection work on practice and on children's well-being and use the findings to inform decisions, prioritise resources and strengthen governance at all levels
3. Strengthen safeguarding training for all staff and governors, ensuring it is fit for purpose and includes information on grooming and establish robust processes to evaluate the impact of training on practice
4. The local authority must:
 - inform the referrer within 7 working days of the referral outcome
 - engage with the child when they state that they are at risk of harm, abuse or neglect
 - strengthen commissioning arrangements and the monitoring of service agreements
 - ensure regular involvement of key practitioners in strategy discussions

Main findings

The voice of the child

Gwynedd local authority leaders have taken positive steps to strengthen the voice of the child to ensure that children's views inform work across a range of services. There is clear evidence of clear intention and leadership that aligns with the principles set out in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The approach shows a firm commitment to viewing children and young people as active partners when planning services. Although these foundations are appropriate, the authority is not yet able to provide clear evidence of the strategic impact of this work. Systems are developing appropriately but have not reached a point where children's views influence policy consistently and lead to significant changes.

The "Llais Ni" (Our Voice) strategy and information pack for schools are examples of methodical planning that promotes the participation of children and young people at school, district (Arfon, Dwyfor, Meirionnydd) and county level. They are based on a suitable model which provides a clear framework for consultation, action and providing feedback. As a result, schools respond positively and provide more formal opportunities for pupils to voice their opinions. However, there is no current and consistent evidence that these arrangements have led to operational decisions by the local authority. Work continues to develop, but the impact on changing policy or culture within the authority remains limited.

The local authority's multi-agency approach encourages strong co-operation between children and family services, education and the youth service. Documents such as the Family Referral Form are evidence of practice that places the child at the centre of the assessment process, taking into account their experiences and needs in a sensitive manner. A 'what matters' approach enables practitioners to identify family strengths and challenges to create more relevant support plans. However, this approach is not used consistently across all teams. This leads to situations where the voice of the child is not always included from the outset.

The local authority has established appropriate multi-agency arrangements to strengthen the safety and well-being of children, with policies and resources to support safeguarding practice. The importance of professional development is recognised, and leaders have shared a range of purposeful resources for staff to support them in ensuring that the voice of the child is at the heart of their work and that they consider the effect of decisions on their well-being. Questionnaires for partners show that most feel that the voice of the child is a central element of safeguarding investigations. However, it was

observed that there are not sufficiently standardised and consistent arrangements for giving children feedback following safeguarding meetings or discussions, where it would be appropriate to do so. This leads to inconsistent experiences for children.

In the child protection cases that were scrutinised, when children are included fully in investigations as part of section 47 arrangements, sufficient attention is given to their voice. This includes detailed records containing the child's exact words, and this is good practice. Although multi-agency joint working is usually suitable, there are gaps in the way in which information about the voice of the child is shared between services, particularly in urgent or complex contexts. This affects the local authority's ability to form a complete picture of the child's experience and feelings when responding to a concern.

There are recent improvements in the way in which practitioners include the child's views in section 5 reviews, where there is an allegation against a person or persons in a position of trust. In the majority of cases, children's views are more prominent and inform actions. However, current practice lacks consistency. Practitioners do not always incorporate the child's voice when they have made an allegation against a person in a position of trust, particularly if a decision is made not to convene a strategy discussion, or following a decision of no further action made at strategy discussion.

The Safeguarding and Welfare Team (education) that was formed in March 2025 demonstrates a growing commitment to ensuring that the voice of the child is a core part of safeguarding work in schools. Through regular school visits, annual questionnaires and collecting statements from pupils systematically, the team gathers valuable information about learners' experiences and needs. This has led to improvements in safeguarding work and better consistency across most schools in Gwynedd. In cases where there is a section 47 investigation, the team's support has led to more consistency in terms of including the child's opinions and, generally, their views are more evident in informing actions.

In most of the schools visited, there are robust arrangements in place to ensure that pupils' voices and opinions are heard. This is done through well-being forums, the work of the school council, sub-panels and internal and national questionnaires. Most pupils have a clear understanding of how their schools, and their staff keep them safe. As a result, they feel safe and know whom to turn for support. They are able to name the key safeguarding staff and those who are available to offer them support. Pupils of all ages appreciate the opportunity to discuss topics that are important to them, such as healthy relationships, e-safety and managing emotions. They take pride in the fact that their school promotes a culture of respect and friendship above all else. In some schools, direct feedback from pupils to the local authority has led to practical changes, for example more sensitive methods of seeking opinions or creating resources that explain safeguarding processes more clearly to young people.

The local authority shows a commitment to including the voice of young people through the district youth forums and the authority-wide Gwynedd Youth Forum. Members of the forum represent young people's views confidently on issues such as well-being, rights and opportunities. The forum provides them with valuable opportunities to develop their ability to influence and co-operate with each other and with adults. However, there is no formal framework that defines roles and responsibilities nor clear enough arrangements to bring the forum's ideas to the attention of leaders or policy committees. As a result, the forum's strategic influence on the local authority's work is limited and its voice is not included systematically enough in the county's formal safeguarding processes.

Within the Youth Service, there are appropriate arrangements for developing the voice of the child and a clear commitment to establishing systems to listen to their views through valuable thematic projects that reflect the voices of young people. For example, there are opportunities to provide feedback on community safety or online experiences, and this helps to improve the department's understanding of the challenges faced by young people. The service provides appropriate opportunities for young people to voice their opinions through their school forums and the area forum. However, there is currently no formal system to gather and use this information systematically enough at county level. Feedback is not used consistently enough to inform strategic decisions, and there is not yet any clear evidence of a direct effect on service priorities or policies.

The youth service shows a strong commitment to supporting young people through targeted projects that address complex social and educational needs. Work with young people aged 11–25 provides valuable opportunities to develop life skills and community links. However, there is a lack of a clear strategic structure to assess the impact of this work. There are no sufficiently systematic self-evaluation or monitoring processes in place to ensure the success of these projects or to ensure that young people's voices influence decisions. As a result, there is significant potential, but without a clear framework to realise it fully.

There are positive examples of practice where young people take part in key decisions, particularly on interview panels for management positions in the Youth Service and teaching positions in schools. This shows leaders' trust in their ability to contribute meaningfully, but the practice has not been expanded sufficiently across all schools.

Overall, Gwynedd local authority has laid a firm foundation for promoting and embedding the voice of the child in its work. There is evidence of thorough planning, structured approaches and a genuine commitment to children's rights. However, the impact of children's voices has not been established fully and there is not yet sufficient evidence of sustainable change. The local authority has set a clear direction and firm foundations for

establishing and maintaining a participatory culture, but it is too early to see the impact of these efforts on day-to-day operations, safeguarding processes and outcomes for children.

Multi-agency joint working

The local authority is committed to strengthening multi-agency working for the benefit of children and families in Gwynedd. There is an established culture of multi-agency cooperation on many levels across children and families services and the education department. The membership of senior leaders, education and children's services officers in a wide range of the local authority's multi-agency forums and panels ensures that the work of those departments has an appropriate influence on decisions and policies. These include the Corporate Parenting Panel and the Grooming and Exploitation Panel, which bring relevant staff together to identify needs and plan specific work. Beneficial multi-agency work can be seen through the Gwynedd and Anglesey Community Safety Partnership, where information is shared by the police and other agencies on relevant issues such as county lines, domestic abuse, hate crimes and antisocial behaviour. As a result, leaders plan work streams and proactive community projects. Managers and officers contribute appropriately to regional discussions and projects, such as the Children's Regional Partnership Board and North Wales Safeguarding in Education Officers Forum.

At an operational level, there is a generally strong relationship between external agencies, such as the police, departments of Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board and third sector organisations. On the whole, information is shared appropriately, for example through weekly police multi-agency risk assessment meetings (MARAC), and this contributes to effective joint working. However, there are examples where there is unacceptable delay from schools and other agencies before referring or sharing information with the children and families services. This prevents key workers from responding to potential safeguarding issues in a timely manner and leads to a lack of credibility in joint working. In other examples, schools do not always receive an acknowledgement from the children and family services department following a referral, particularly when sharing a concern under section 5 of the Wales Safeguarding Procedures. This leads to confusion regarding the appropriateness of the referral, a lack of certainty regarding any follow-up and a risk to the effective safeguarding of children.

In a questionnaire to headteachers of schools in Gwynedd and in face-to-face discussions during the inspection, most schools indicate satisfaction in being able to contact the children and families service directly for advice. They express the same satisfaction regarding the availability of staff to provide them with guidance on child

safeguarding. They also praise the quality and impact of the cooperation with social workers when pupils are placed on the child protection register and where there are care and support plans for children and their families.

Officers within the Safeguarding and Welfare Team (education) contribute beneficially to some relevant forums and carry out a bridging role between schools and children's services appropriately. The work of this team is developing suitably and has led to an increase in the support provided to schools on safeguarding and well-being issues. As a result of this guidance and support, headteachers and designated safeguarding persons in schools note that they have a better understanding of safeguarding issues and can exemplify confidently how this has had a positive effect on their practice. Overall, there is regular communication between Safeguarding and Welfare Team (education) officers and social workers, and this allows them to share relevant information with schools, when necessary. Despite this new and valuable development, their roles and responsibilities are not clear across services, and this sometimes leads to confusion in terms of responsibilities and in the guidance or advice given.

There are strengths in the way in which the children and families service complies with the Wales Safeguarding Procedures (WSP), but elements of this work are inconsistent. Arrangements for screening referrals regarding children and families are robust and timely. Appropriate consideration is given to the well-being of all involved in a safeguarding investigation process, including the person against whom an allegation is made. The children and family services department holds strategy discussions where concerns have been expressed about a child's safety. However, this does not always occur within the statutory timescale. For the most part, only children's services and the police attend strategy discussions. This is the minimum in terms of the expectations of the WSP, and the contribution of key practitioners is expected in these discussions. There are examples where representation from other agencies would have been beneficial. In a majority of cases, key partners attend strategy meetings in accordance with Section 5 of the WSP. Good attention is also given to the three aspects that need to be considered, namely harmful and/or criminal behaviour and suitability to work or volunteer with children, or care for them. Discussions are held that are both suitable for safeguarding and risk management arrangements, in addition to employment and legal matters. Minutes of strategy meetings show that purposeful discussions have taken place, which have led to an agreed outcome in line with the four outcome categories (substantiated, unsubstantiated, unfounded, deliberately invented or malicious).

Arrangements for conducting child protection case conferences are robust. The notification and information gathering period is timely and suitable. There are purposeful contributions to discussions from a range of external agencies, and this leads to a strong mutual understanding of the situation of children and the challenges facing families. Recently, the independent chair of these conferences has cooperated with the head of

the Safeguarding and Welfare Team (education) to improve the information gathering forms from schools, and this is beginning to lead to consistency in terms of the quality and usefulness of the information shared.

There are secure joint working arrangements between schools and multi-agency partners to support the well-being of children and young people, and this has strengthened over time. Very often, core group meetings are held in the school itself to plan and review support for children on the child protection register, and this facilitates discussions well. A strong feature of the work of schools is the collaboration with external partners to provide interventions, learning experiences and support for vulnerable pupils. In the schools visited, there is consistency in provision for pupils' emotional development. This includes support from specific members of staff, beneficial social interventions, sessions by school counsellors and external mental health specialists and collaboration with officers within the inclusion service, 'Ysgol Bro'. In most schools, there are quiet and calm areas where children can go to receive care, comfort and support, when this is needed.

Governance and leadership

Senior leaders have a clear vision for ensuring strong safeguarding procedures within the local authority. They are open to learning and determined to address the improvements necessary to make a difference. The Chief Executive, along with other senior officers, sets a decisive mindset for safeguarding children and young people, and reinforces the culture of safeguarding in all aspects of the local authority's work. On the whole, leaders support their workforce sensitively while also encouraging them to improve practice, where necessary, by equipping them to make decisions in order to improve.

Elected members, including the leader, leaders of the education portfolio and children and family services portfolio, along with members of scrutiny boards, are all committed to addressing the issues requiring improvement. Governance structures across several layers within the local authority, through the Cabinet, scrutiny committees, the Strategic Safeguarding Panel and the Programme Board, together ensure formal arrangements of appropriate challenge and reporting. They place safeguarding as the local authority's highest priority and are targeting purposeful additional resources to strengthen provision.

Overall, the local authority's leadership and governance of safeguarding is moving in a positive direction and there is a clear corporate prioritisation of safeguarding across the local authority. A Recovery Board is in place, which provides credible independent challenge to the local authority's governance of safeguarding. The Board operates with a clear purpose, taking into account the recommendations of the Child Practice Review. Board members scrutinise the developments of the local authority's response plan, expecting evidence of impact and not just activity. The independent chair sets suitable

expectations in terms of accountability. The work of the Board strives to hold leaders to account when moving from editing plans to delivering and demonstrating impact. However, some aspects are progressing at a slower pace and there is little evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of actions. This limits the ability of board members to ensure that the envisaged improvements are realised consistently at school and corporate level.

There is evidence of embedding learning from recent events and there is a more open feel to scrutiny and learning across departments. For example, the local authority has conducted an internal audit of the awareness of field staff of the corporate safeguarding policy, and regular performance reporting across departments includes a firm focus on safeguarding. A wide range of relevant fora and panels allows leaders to share and discuss their work. This contributes well to a mutual understanding of roles and responsibilities and provides relevant stakeholders with an overview of the local authority's work.

The Strategic Safeguarding Panel has corporate responsibility for overseeing child and adult safeguarding arrangements at local authority levels and is accountable to the Cabinet. The aim of this is to try to provide assurance to Elected Members and the statutory Corporate Director that suitable arrangements and procedures are in place. However, the impact and quality of arrangements are not measured sufficiently. For example, there is a lack of systematic analysis of the link between the level of training, workforce performance and the impact on safeguarding processes. There is a strong emphasis on activity data, but outcome information or learning from reviews is limited. The children and families service does not regularly share information about safeguarding referrals with the commissioning department. This limits managers' ability to monitor the effectiveness of commissioned services and to support decisions around safeguarding and quality assurance.

The local authority has made decisive changes. Safeguarding visits are now standardised across all schools and the monitoring of mandatory training and Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks is stronger. Openness of reporting has increased. The education scrutiny committee has conducted an investigation to assess whether safeguarding arrangements in Gwynedd's schools are appropriate and implemented consistently across the county. This endeavour reflects the committee's commitment to ensuring improvements, in addition to decisive governance of this area. However, there is currently no evidence of the final results or findings of this work and, therefore, the impact on policy or school practice is limited.

Joint working between the education department and children and family services has strengthened over time and additional resources supports schools and the local authority substantially. A few leaders in children and families services have taken on significant

additional responsibilities recently and this has created additional pressure and burden. However, there is a risk to the sustainability of the temporary arrangements and long-term security, which may affect speed and consistency in the standard of practice. Senior leaders are aware of these challenges and are currently planning sufficient resources to mitigate this risk.

Many schools demonstrate appropriate safeguarding arrangements. These include up-to-date policies, regular training for designated personnel and governors, safeguarding reports for governing bodies and more organised self-evaluation methods. However, the local authority acknowledges that the ability to scrutinise effectively varies between governing bodies. New safeguarding visit arrangements by the Education Safeguarding and Welfare team have been useful in establishing an initial picture and in supporting schools in relation to their safeguarding arrangements. However, arrangements for ensuring the quality of those visits, or the way in which findings are fed back to school and corporate governance, are not incisive enough. This limits schools' ability to effect change and make improvements to safeguarding arrangements.

The local authority demonstrates a clear strategic commitment to embedding the voice of the child in safeguarding practice and policy development. The draft Child's Voice Strategy, for example, sets out the vision, values and legislative framework, and information packs for young people explain their roles in recruitment and policy making. Although the workforce's awareness of the importance of promoting the voice of the child is strong, there is no formal policy. In addition, there is very little systemic measurement of the impact of the voice of the child, and this limits the assurance that children's views influence service decisions consistently. To date, it is not clear enough that the local authority takes advantage of identifying good practices of learning from national practices in relation to the voice of the child to have a positive influence on its local policies and arrangements.

Recent changes to management roles have affected the consistency of the local authority's attendance and contributions to the Regional Safeguarding Board, but engagement is now more consistent. This shows a commitment to working in an ongoing partnership.

Training and support

Gwynedd local authority is developing a comprehensive, coherent and ambitious system in terms of training and support to ensure child safety across its education and social services. The Effective Child Protection (ECP) model has been created and developed by a senior leader in the children and families service and has been disseminated successfully across the department. The approach is based on national principles and reflects a strong commitment to ensuring that practitioners understand and are able to

implement their statutory responsibilities. Leaders are beginning to discuss how to extend the ECP training across the local authority and beyond and with designated safeguarding persons in schools.

Social work practitioners express satisfaction with the good support they receive from managers and colleagues to help them carry out their work. They appreciate the availability of line managers to offer regular support, guidance and supervision. This helps to ensure regular opportunities for practitioners to discuss and reflect on their practice.

There is a wide range of professional learning and development opportunities at different levels, with specific Group B and Group C (different categories of training depending on the level of practice) safeguarding training programmes that align with the national standards of learning and development of the Wales Safeguarding Procedures. The mixed approach, face-to-face sessions and e-modules, ensures accessibility and promotes broad participation across the workforce. The core training covers the general principles of safeguarding and offers relevant information about recognising the signs of physical or emotional abuse. The use of online resources, such as modules on Hwb and the Safeguarding Dashboard, shows a commitment to transparency and accountability. The monitoring system enables the tracking of the completion of training, identifying gaps and ensuring that practitioners keep their qualifications up to date. This facilitates a clear picture of progress and supports the management of evidence-based information.

The inclusion of areas such as identifying abuse, understanding relevant legislation and promoting the principle that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility, is evidence of a professional and co-ordinated approach. However, there is no specific training on grooming. A lack of focus on the subtle and multifaceted nature of grooming, particularly when the behaviour takes place online or in familiar social contexts, creates a potential risk for children and adults. Not all members of school staff, practitioners or governors feel confident in recognising the early signs of psychological control, inappropriate influence or abusive relationships hidden under the guise of care. As a result, they may fail to recognise early signs of grooming or fail to respond promptly, thereby undermining a culture of reporting and accountability. Providing specialist training could ensure that all members of the workforce understand and respond confidently and correctly to the risks of grooming or new risks and trends, thereby strengthening the local authority's safeguarding arrangements further.

Additional resources for governors and school leaders demonstrate a proactive approach to strengthening safeguarding leadership and promote professional reflection through scrutiny templates and self-evaluation tools. This helps create a culture of accountability and clear expectations at all levels. Based on the responses of those we engaged with, governors are committed and value the support and training provided. They demonstrate a clear understanding of their responsibilities and implement appropriate arrangements

for Disclosure and Barring Service checks and compliance with safeguarding requirements. Practices such as regular meetings between the designated safeguarding governor and the designated safeguarding person and annual safeguarding learning walks are evidence of an organised approach to monitoring and improvement. However, there is room to strengthen some aspects. Although training for governors is comprehensive and accessible, there is not yet sufficient evidence to show the extent to which it changes practice or improves understanding on the ground. Evaluating impact often focuses on participation or course completion, rather than changing culture or behaviour in schools. As a result, it is difficult to assess the real impact on children's safety. Some governors also continue to show a lack of confidence in challenging school leaders on safeguarding issues, relying too much on the opinions of individuals.

The Safeguarding and Welfare Team has strengthened training and support arrangements through an accessible and responsive service for schools. Support, which includes offering prompt expertise, providing a dedicated helpline and a systematic approach to dealing with concerns and allegations, reflects a coherent arrangement. However, monitoring and reporting are still being developed and evidence of impact on school practice is limited. Safeguarding audit reports show inconsistent quality and a lack of clarity regarding actions for improvement. These reports contain generic and repetitive comments, with criticism that is too general and without specific guidelines. No timescales or milestones have been identified for monitoring progress, and this reduces their usefulness as a practical improvement tool.

Although the local authority's policies are thorough and extensive, for example safeguarding, safe recruitment, e-safety and whistleblowing, there is a lack of a link between the documents and practical methods of evaluating their impact on practice. Additionally, there is no formal process for annual safeguarding reviews. This shortcoming hinders progress and the ability to measure impact over time.

Despite these gaps, the local authority has identified areas of training that need to be strengthened. The current combination of training programmes, online resources and scrutiny tools at school and government level reflects a professional, structured approach based on national principles. The use of theoretical models to support practice shows an understanding of the importance of professional reflection and accountability. This strengthens staff's ability to learn continuously and develop an organisational culture which focuses on safeguarding and responsible leadership, but it is too early to measure the full effect of this approach. Plans are promising and show a clear vision, but evaluation systems are still being developed. Without effective measures of impact, there is a risk that the planned work will not have a practical influence on the safety and well-being of children.

In general, the local authority's strengths lie in its structure, strategic clarity and commitment to ensuring that the workforce is confident and qualified in terms of safeguarding children. The approach is proactive, collaborative and ambitious. However, to ensure continuous improvement and sustainable impact, more effective and clear evaluation processes need to be developed to measure change on the ground. As the system matures, monitoring the evidence of impact and building the confidence of the workforce will be key to realising the strategic ambition and to ensuring measurable improvements to the lives of children in Gwynedd.

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