

Board Briefing October 2024

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Here is a summary of our latest Social Care Wales Board meeting.

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Here is a summary of our latest Social Care Wales Board meeting.

Special thanks to Powys County Council

As part of our ongoing focus on engaging in two-way conversation with our key stakeholders and partners, our strategic development day on 23 October was facilitated by Powys County Council.

Image of Powys County Council slogan

Through presentations and discussions, we heard about some of the strategic developments which are taking place in Powys to help maintain and improve services against the background of increasing demand and limited resources. This includes:

- developing community-based 'early help hubs' linked to clothing and shoe banks;
- sharing space with partners to enable them to deliver their day centre provision;
- taking a proactive approach to the transformation of children's services;
- investing in local fostering services to reduce reliance on commissioned services;
- adopting innovative ways of engaging with children who are looked after.

It was great to see some of the initiatives which Social Care Wales has been developing in partnership with the sector being put into practice with innovation, energy and commitment. We were particularly pleased to see the

emphasis on recruitment and retention and workforce well-being and development and a genuine focus on person centred care and evidence-based practice.

Members also got a sense of the mutually supportive relationship which exists between our two organisations. Our senior team took away some areas where Social Care Wales might be able to provide further support, which they will follow up on.

Perhaps the most significant thing we took away from our day with Powys was a sense of the genuine passion and commitment which the social services team has for their work, despite the difficult challenges they face. The Chair has written to the Director of Social Services and Well-being, Nina Davies, to thank her and her team for arranging the event.

Image of Board members

Board meeting - key items for discussion, decision and action

The public meeting of the Board was held on 24 October with Zoom facilities available for those unable to attend in person. The following items of business were conducted:

- the Chief Executive **set the context** for the meeting, providing an update on recent developments which impacted on the Board's considerations;
- the Minister for Children and Social Care, Dawn Bowden MS, joined the meeting to conduct our **annual accountability review** for 2023-2024;

- the draft **annual report and accounts 2023-2024** and Management Letter were approved following detailed scrutiny by the Audit and Risk committee;
- committee chairs provided a summary of the key issues which were discussed during the **September committee meetings**, highlighting areas requiring the Board's attention;
- the Board reviewed progress against the **2024-2025 business plan and budget** to the end September 2024 and gained assurance that the organisation has effective arrangements in place to monitor and respond to variations against the plan;
- the Board discussed and approved proposed minor changes to the Social Care Wales **Registration and Fitness to Practise Rules**;
- members scrutinised and received assurance in relation to the management and delivery of the **Social Care Wales workforce development plan 2023-2024**;
- the Board approved the **Social Care Wales workforce development plan grant circular for 2025-2026** subject to minor amendments;
- members reviewed and approved a revised set of **standing orders** which determine the way that Social Care Wales Board meetings are conducted;
- members reviewed and approved the Social Care Wales **scheme of delegation** following previous scrutiny by the Audit and Risk Committee.

Here is a snapshot of the key agenda items which were discussed during the September committee meetings;

Improvement

**Regulation and
Standards**

Audit and Risk

- positive cultures programme;
- review of leadership training programme;
- supporting Welsh language in the social care, early years and childcare sector.
- Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) report;
- Early Years, Childcare and Play consultation;
- Professional Standards Authority's 'Standards of Good Regulation' benchmarking exercise.
- 2023-24 and Audit of Accounts Report and Management Letter
- Annual summary of internal audit reports
- Review of the Strategic Risk Register

Spotlight on...

Image of a spotlight

Social Care Wales Annual Accountability Review

The Minister for Children and Social Care, [Dawn Bowden MS](#), joined the Board meeting to conduct our annual accountability review.

The Minister's visit was the final stage of the accountability review process, following a series of meetings where the organisation's performance in delivering against the objectives set out in the annual remit letter were reviewed in depth by Welsh Government officials.

The Minister received a series of presentations from the chairs of the Board's three main committees which summarised the organisation's achievements through three lenses, namely:

- Improvement, Workforce Development, Research, Data and Innovation;

- Regulation and Standards;
- The effectiveness of Social Care Wales.

Image of Dawn Bowden MS

The Minister was advised that during 2023 to 2024, Social Care Wales had broadly delivered against all the objectives which were set out in the annual remit letter. Most notably:

- the Social Care Strategic Workforce Delivery Plan had been developed and published;
- Ymlaen, the strategy for social care research, data and innovation had been launched;
- further progress had been made in delivering the Social Care Data Strategy;
- ongoing support had been provided to the Early Years and Childcare sector;
- the organisation had continued to fully discharge its regulatory functions against the background of growing demand and complexity, linked to the expansion of the Register.

The presentation from the Chair of the Audit and Risk Committee focused more specifically on the effectiveness of the organisation's corporate governance arrangements, emphasising that during 2023-24:

- the Auditor General issued an unqualified opinion on our annual report and accounts;
- we managed within our allocated budget with a small carry forward;

- the annual internal audit programme provided reasonable levels of reassurance about the effectiveness of the organisation's internal systems and processes;
- the organisation's corporate health remained relatively strong as indicated by low level of staff sickness, low levels of turnover and high levels of staff morale and motivation.

In responding to the presentation, the Minister commented favourably on the work which Social Care Wales was doing to support the sector. She mentioned the strength of the working partnership which exists between Social Care Wales and Welsh Government. She was conscious that there have been significant changes within the Board and executive team in the last 12 months and thanked the outgoing chief executive, Sue Evans for her contribution.

The Minister reminded the Board of the huge challenges currently facing the social care, early years and childcare sectors. She emphasised the important contribution that Social Care Wales can make in driving forward Welsh Government objectives in these areas. She also commented on the growth in the size of the registered workforce since 2018 and the relatively low number of fitness to practise removals, which she felt was a positive endorsement of the value-based recruitment process.

In relation to social care data, the Minister said that this was an area of significant focus within the Senedd and was pleased to hear that this was also a focus for Social Care Wales. Looking forward, she said that the priority over the coming term would be on delivering consistency in services across Wales, with a focus on progress in the independent and third sectors.

In closing, the Minister commented on the positive culture which existed within Social Care Wales and asked the Chair to pass on her thanks to our staff for the 'amazing' work which they do on behalf of the sector.

Image of Board meeting

Emerging issues

Student bursaries

Whilst scrutinising progress in delivering against the objectives set out in the Business Plan, members asked why only 126 of the 170 student bursaries which are available for 2024/25 were expected to be taken up.

In responding, officers acknowledged that whilst significant progress has been made in recent years in increasing numbers entering the social work profession through the local authority managed 'grow your own' route, the slow rate of entry to the profession through the university route is cause for concern.

The Chief Executive emphasised that Social Care Wales is committed to maintaining a vibrant 'grow your own' scheme to run alongside a vibrant direct entry bursary scheme for undergraduates and postgraduates. As a result, Social Care Wales is working with Welsh Government and the university sector to understand what is driving this trend and to consider options going forward.

One member was concerned the same issue had been raised by the Board in previous years and felt that the situation was not improving, despite the monetary value of the bursary being raised in 2023-24. Officers acknowledged that the situation was not improving but pointed to the fact that the target figure had been sustained at a high level so as not to restrict the number of social work students coming forward. One member urged the Board not to lose sight of the impact on voluntary and third sector organisations.

In seeking to understand what lies behind this issue, officers highlighted a range of external factors such as tuition fee increases, the cost of living and the

financial challenges facing higher education institutions more broadly. Initial enquiries suggested that there were similar challenges in recruiting students onto other vocational degree courses.

Officers also highlighted work which was being undertaken jointly with the Welsh Local Government Association to continue to support all routes into social work qualifications, learning from similar work in England and Scotland. This work was being enabled by improvements in the annual workforce data collection process and the data portal.

The Board agreed that this matter requires a bigger conversation and that more work needs to be done to put the issue of student numbers front and centre for Social Care Wales and wider stakeholders.

As a starting point, the Chief Executive agreed to arrange for a more focused discussion to take place at the December Regulation and Standards committee looking at trends, actions taken to date and further options going forward. An invitation was extended to all members to participate in the discussion on this item.

Image of Board meeting

Next Board meeting

This will be held on Thursday 6 February 2025 in Pembrokeshire with a joint strategic development session taking place the day before facilitated by the Pembrokeshire County Council social services team. The following items are currently scheduled for discussion:

- update from committee chairs

- context setting and key messages from the chief executive
- draft business plan 2025-2026
- business plan quarter three progress report
- social partnership report
- Board development synopsis
- meeting effectiveness.

Previous Board newsletters

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