

Meeting of:	SOCIAL SERVICES, HEALTH AND WELLBEING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Date of Meeting:	8 JUNE 2026
Report Title:	“OUR BRAVERY BROUGHT JUSTICE” – THE BRIDGEND RESPONSE TO THE NORTH WALES CHILD PRACTICE REVIEW
Report Owner: Responsible Chief Officer / Cabinet Member	CORPORATE DIRECTOR OF SOCIAL SERVICES AND WELLBEING
Responsible Officer:	DAVID WRIGHT ACTING HEAD OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES
Policy Framework and Procedure Rules:	There is no effect upon the Policy Framework and Procedure Rules
Executive Summary:	This report intends to provide a comprehensive summary of the Extended Child Practice Review commissioned by the North Wales Safeguarding Board following the conviction of Neil Foden, former Headteacher of Ysgol Friars, for serious sexual and physical abuse of pupils. The review covers the period January 2017 to September 2023. Welsh Government, Care Inspectorate Wales and Estyn have requested updates from safeguarding partners as to how the recommendations from the report will be taken forward. The purpose of this document is to: • Highlight key findings and systemic failures identified in the review. • Provide the range of missed opportunities. • Reflect on staff actions and the lack of professional curiosity that allowed abuse to persist. • Present the recommendations to strengthen safeguarding practice across education and multi-agency settings and how these are being implemented in Bridgend.

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 This report intends to provide a summary of the Extended Child Practice Review commissioned by the North Wales Safeguarding Board following the conviction of Neil Foden, former Headteacher of Ysgol Friars, for serious sexual and physical abuse of pupils.
- 1.2 The purpose of this document is to:
- Highlight key findings and systemic failures identified in the review.
 - Demonstrate some of the missed opportunities to have prevented Foden's offending.
 - Identify the learning, recommendations and actions that are required at a National, Regional and Local level across agencies and how these are being implemented in Bridgend.
- 1.3 The Extended Child Practice Review can be found at **Appendix 1**. In addition, the local authority action plan in response to the recommendations can be found at **Appendix 2**

2. Background

- 2.1 On the 6 September 2023 a pupil at Ysgol Friars, a school in North Wales, showed staff images and messages on her phone which she reported were from the Headteacher, Neil Foden. The phone number was checked and confirmed to be that of the Headteacher. The content of a number of the messages was explicitly sexual and images showed the pupil in Foden's car. The pupil is reported in the referral by the member of staff who took the disclosure to have said that she had been in a 'romantic relationship' with Foden for a number of months prior to disclosure. Foden was arrested later the same day and remanded in custody. Following this, other victims came forward making disclosures of a sexual nature. The criminal case went to court in April 2024 and Foden was sentenced on 1 July 2024.
- 2.2 Foden was found guilty of 19 charges against four female pupils at the school where he was Headteacher, including 12 counts of sexual activity with a child and two counts of sexual activity with a child while in a position of trust. He was acquitted on charges relating to one other child.
- 2.3 Foden was subsequently sentenced to 17 years imprisonment and is currently serving his sentence. The judge recognised in his summing up that Foden had been under-charged.
- 2.4 Since Foden's conviction in July 2024 further victims have come forward. The earliest alleged sexual abuse was in 1979 when Foden had just qualified as a teacher and was in his first post.

3. Current situation / proposal

Child Practice Review Findings

- 3.1 Foden joined Ysgol Friars (School) as a teacher of English in 1988 and was promoted to Deputy Head before becoming Headteacher in 1997. Foden had been described to the Panel as being 'larger than life' - both in stature and presence. He was renowned for the way in which he ran the school. Well known in the local community, local authority and often referenced by local and national press, the BBC referred to Foden as being the 'go to person' if an opinion was needed on a controversial matter or where other Headteachers in Wales were reluctant to engage.
- 3.2 A prominent figure in the education union, now known as the National Education Union (NEU), in 2018 Foden was found guilty by the Education Workforce Council (EWC) of having bullied a member of his own staff who was subsequently awarded compensation. Foden was widely acknowledged by those interviewed (within the review) as being a bully. This behaviour was linked to a matter which had resulted in a complaint being made about him to the exam board (WJEC) regarding the manipulation of examination results. This complaint was also upheld.
- 3.3 In 2018, following the sudden death of the Deputy Head and Designated Safeguarding Person (DSP), Foden appointed himself as Pastoral Lead at the school and took on the role of oversight of safeguarding matters, supported by the School Office Manager. At this point, Foden also implemented a change in the structure of the pastoral team, replacing professional teaching staff with non-teaching staff taking up the Heads of Year role.
- 3.4 At the end of 2018, a new Deputy Head and Designated Safeguarding Person was appointed to the role of DSP in Ysgol Friars, despite lacking any notable safeguarding experience. The DSP was supported by the School Office Manager who was untrained and also inexperienced in safeguarding. In 2018, the first concern about Foden's interactions with a female pupil was raised. This was soon followed by a series of other complaints and concerns being raised with both local authority Education and Children and Families Services departments.
- 3.5 During the period under review, numerous concerns were raised about Foden. Prior to his arrest in September 2023, Foden did not have any criminal convictions recorded against him.
- 3.6 Following his sentencing in July 2024 a further victim has come forward to the Reviewers alleging a non-recent sexual assault by Foden when she was a child.

3.7 During the 6-year period that the review covered, it was identified that there were over 50 missed opportunities to protect children and prevent Foden from committing further incidents of abuse.

3.8 These missed opportunities include the following areas:

1. Minimisation of Concerns
2. Lack of Professional Curiosity
3. Over-reliance on Foden's Status
4. Weak Governance and Oversight
5. Poor Inter-agency Collaboration
6. Inadequate Safeguarding Training
7. Culture of Fear and Intimidation
8. Procedural Failures

3.9 The review highlighted 7 themes for related to practice and organisation learning.

3.10 These included:

- Impact of Status, Reputation and Culture
- Reporting Concerns, Managing Allegations, Making Referrals - systems and processes
- Interagency Working
- Restrictive Practices
- Governance and Complaints
- Crisis Planning and Crisis Response
- Training and Curriculum

3.11 The review has made an extensive number of recommendations which are as follows:

1. Listening to the Voice of the Child

The review demonstrates that children's behaviour was not always viewed through a safeguarding lens by the professionals who worked with them, that they were not listened to when concerns were raised nor given a voice in the processes designed to keep them safe.

2. The management of allegations and concerns about people who are in a position of trust who work with children and adults at risk – Section 5 of the Wales Safeguarding Procedures

The Wales Safeguarding Procedures 2019, Section 5 are currently under review. The Welsh Government should ensure that the revision of Section 5 procedures is shaped by the learning from this Review and are stress tested against this case. The review has

highlighted weaknesses in the system designed to safeguard children where there has been inconsistency in the application of threshold criteria for intervention, a lack of a common understanding of 'suitability' to work with children and what is acceptable professional conduct of adults in a position of trust and power. This has left children at risk of abuse and harm.

3. Systemic weaknesses which impacted on the effectiveness of inter-agency working to safeguard children.

The review highlighted issues in relation to information sharing, professional challenge, escalation and management of safeguarding allegations.

4. The need for training - thinking the 'unthinkable' and understanding 'it could happen here'

The review has highlighted that it simply did not occur to professional adults working with children that pupils were being sexually abused by the Headteacher at their school. There needs to be cultural shift in response to concerns about an individual working with children. The Review highlighted that in the established framework of safeguarding training there is limited focus on identifying abuse and the risk of harm from adults working in a position of trust in schools and other organisations. Foden was able to exploit gaps in the existing framework, relying on professionals' lack of understanding of the modus operandi of sex offenders and how they groom not only their victims but also the environment in which they work.

5. The Governance of Schools in Wales

The Review has highlighted the weaknesses and inherent risks associated with the way in which schools are governed in Wales.

6. Restrictive Practices

The Review identified the excessive use of restrictive practices had become embedded in the culture of the school.

7. Crisis Management

Although rare, critical incidents of this nature require a strategic and coordinated response. The Review has highlighted that in this case the School, Local Authority Children and Families Services and Education Services had neither single agency nor multi-agency coordinated plans in place to respond immediately to the critical incident in an effective, coordinated way.

8. Recommendations for the Safeguarding Partners

The Review recommended that:

Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board

- a. Considers the sharing of anonymised Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) data with Local Authorities to identify hotspots and thematic concerns
- b. Provide assurance to the Regional Safeguarding Children's Board that health professionals seek safeguarding advice when a child presents at an appointment accompanied by a third party without parental consent

3.12 Bridgend County Borough Council's (BCBC) response to the findings

3.13 Since the publication of the review, a presentation on the findings was given to the BCBC Corporate Safeguarding Board and a multi-agency working group was created to develop the action plan and current responses to the findings. This multi-agency group included Adult Services, Children and Family Services, Human Resources, Education, Health and South Wales Police to ensure that the recommendations are fully responded to.

3.14 The findings have been shared with staff across the local authority including education staff. Further sessions will be held with staff in relation to this review and the implications for their safeguarding practice.

3.15 The action plan will be monitored via our Corporate Safeguarding Board which is held monthly and will report back to the Regional Safeguarding Board as required.

4. Equality implications (including Socio-economic Duty and Welsh Language)

4.1 The protected characteristics identified within the Equality Act, Socio-economic Duty and the impact on the use of the Welsh Language have been considered in the preparation of this report. As a public body in Wales the Council must consider the impact of strategic decisions, such as the development or the review of policies, strategies, services and functions. It is considered that there will be no significant or unacceptable equality impacts as a result of this report.

5. Well-being of Future Generations implications and connection to Corporate Well-being Objectives

5.1 The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 provides the framework for improving the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales. The five ways of working have been considered in the development of this report as follows:

Involvement	The report highlights the importance of the voice of children in safeguarding activity.
Long term	The report sets out recommendations to improve safeguarding practice in the long-term.
Prevention	The report reflects actions that can be taken to prevent such instances in the future.
Integration	This report demonstrates the importance of multi-agency working and information sharing.
Collaboration	Children and Family Services along with Education, Early Years and Young People's directorate have taken the lead on the development of the BCBC action plan.

6. Climate Change and Nature Implications

6.1 There are no climate change and nature implications as a result of this report.

7. Safeguarding and Corporate Parent Implications

7.1 This report outlines significant areas of consideration for departments in discharging their safeguarding responsibilities. As set out in the report, governance of the action plan will be via the Corporate Safeguarding Board.

8. Financial Implications

8.1 There are no financial implications associated with this report.

9. Recommendation

9.1 It is recommended that the Social Services, Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee consider the report and note the action plan that has been developed in response the findings.

Background documents

None

Appendix 1 – North Wales Extended Child Practice Review

Appendix 2 – BCBC Action plan.