

PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Performance Scrutiny Committee held in Council Chamber, County Hall, Ruthin and by video conference on Thursday, 26 September 2024 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

Councillors Ellie Chard, Bobby Feeley, Martyn Hogg, Carol Holliday, Hugh Irving (Chair), Paul Keddie, Terry Mendies, Gareth Sandilands (Vice-Chair) and Andrea Tomlin

ALSO PRESENT

The Lead Member for Education, Children and Young People. Diane King and the Lead Member for Welsh Language, Culture and Heritage, Emrys Wynne at the Committee's invitation.

Corporate Director: Governance and Business (GW), Head of Education (GD), Inclusion Officer – Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Implementation (JE) , Principal Education Managers (JB & RT) and the Headteachers of Ysgol Pen Morfa (SD) and Denbigh High School (GW), Education Social Work Team Leader/Safeguarding Officer (WW), Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP) Development Officer (MLIJ), Scrutiny Co-ordinator (RhE), Committee Administrators (RhT-J Minute Taker) & Webcaster (ED).

GwE representatives/advisors - Jacqueline Chan (Primary Sector) and Mair Herbert (Secondary Sector)

1 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Alan Hughes and from Neil Roberts (Co-opted Member for Education).

2 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The following members declared personal interests in business items 5, 6, 7 and 8:

Councillor Ellie Chard – Local Education Authority (LEA) Governor at Ysgol Tir

Morfa and a Town/Community Council Governor at Christchurch School

Councillor Martyn Hogg – Parent Governor at St Asaph VP School

Councillor Carol Holliday – Town/Community Council Governor at both Ysgol Penmorfa and Ysgol Clawdd Offa

Councillor Gareth Sandilands – LEA Governor at Ysgol Clawdd Offa

Councillor Andrea Tomlin – as a close family member was on the teaching staff of one of the county's secondary schools. In addition, a personal acquaintance was a member of the Council's Educational Social Work Team (business item 6).

3 URGENT MATTERS AS AGREED BY THE CHAIR

No items of an urgent nature had been raised with the Chair or the Scrutiny Co-ordinator prior to the commencement of the meeting.

4 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The minutes of the Performance Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 18 July 2024 were submitted. It was:

Resolved: that the minutes of the Performance Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 18 July 2024 be confirmed as a true and accurate record of the proceedings.

Matters arising:

Pages 11 – 12, 'Cefndy Year End Report 2023/24': members queried if the enterprise had changed its name from Cefndy Enterprises to Cefndy and also whether the visits for county councillors to the manufacturing site had yet been arranged. The Scrutiny Co-ordinator advised that the enterprise's name on its website was 'Cefndy Healthcare and Manufacturing'. Three potential dates, during November, would shortly be circulated to councillors enabling them to book a visit to the manufacturing site.

5 ADDITIONAL LEARNING NEEDS TRANSFORMATION UPDATE

The Lead Member for Education, Children and Young People, alongside the Head of Education, presented the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Transformation Update September 2024 report (previously circulated). The report aimed to provide a further update on the progress made to ensure the Local Authority and schools were meeting their statutory requirements under the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act, 2018.

The update focused on the progress in implementing the Welsh Government's ALN reforms, which were aimed at improving support for children and young people with learning difficulties. During the past year, Denbighshire's education team successfully transitioned from the old Special Educational Needs (SEN) system to the new ALN framework. The transition included the introduction of Individual Development Plans (IDPs), which replaced the existing statements of SEN. These IDPs ensured a more personalised approach to supporting learners, aligning with the new legislative requirements outlined in the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018.

Officers reported that all staff supporting students with ALN had undergone comprehensive training. This training equipped them to handle the new processes and ensured that they could effectively collaborate with schools, parents, and other stakeholders. Additionally, efforts had been made to improve multi-agency cooperation, particularly with health and social services, to provide a more holistic approach to learner support.

The update highlighted several challenges encountered during the transformation, particularly around resource allocation and meeting the increased assessments

demand. Despite these, officers had met critical deadlines set by the Welsh Government to implement the new system. The Head of Education advised that the Service was constantly monitoring and scrutinising schools' compliance with the Act's requirements, as were Estyn. Since the pandemic approximately half of the county's schools had been inspected by Estyn, of the 26 schools inspected only one had received a recommendation relating to improving the provision of ALN services.

Responding to Members questions the Lead Member, officers and the Primary Headteacher:

- confirmed that there was a robust communication plan in place to inform parents on the requirements placed on local education authorities (LEA) and schools by the 2018 Act and how the LEA and schools proposed to deliver the duties placed upon them. This helped to manage expectations. All the details and information on the work carried was available on the Council's website. There was also much communication between local schools, which helped with sharing lessons learnt, best practice etc. This was in addition to regional and national work to share best practice and support a consistent approach for the transformation process. All the open dialogue made the process somewhat easier.
- advised that whilst funding was currently available for the 2 temporary ALN advisory teachers posts until August 2025 the financial situation was difficult for the entire Council, and some difficult decisions would need to be made regarding the funding for the next financial year. The demand for ALN support was increasing, nevertheless the Service had to prioritise all educational needs and deliver its services within the budget that was available to it.
- confirmed that the education team took a multidisciplinary approach to meet the needs of each individual. The Inclusion Officer—ALN Implementation added that there were close working relationships with the health board and children's services to ensure that the needs of the individuals were met and wherever possible tailored accordingly to support their unique needs.
- agreed with members that budget constraints and the staffing shortages across all sectors was an ever-present challenge, particularly recruiting specialist staff. However, each school had an Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinator (ALNCo) who worked with the school to mitigate the challenges that arose. Each school's ALNCo worked closely with their counterparts in their school cluster to support each other, share experiences and best practice. The headteacher of Ysgol Penmorfa illustrated how that school were currently facing challenges as their ALNCo had recently stood down. in the interim her and the deputy headteacher were maintaining the workload but were extremely grateful for the support and advice provided by the LEA as and when they required it.

Following an in-depth discussion, the Committee:

Resolved: subject to the above observations and acknowledging both the local and national challenges faced in meeting the statutory requirements of

the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018, to –

- (i) congratulate all stakeholders and endorse the work undertaken to date to deliver the transformation work required to comply with the duties placed upon them under the Act; and***
- (ii) request that a further progress report be presented to the Committee in twelve months' time when all schools and the Local Education Authority (LEA) are expected to be fully compliant with the duties placed upon under the Act.***

6 PROMOTE SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AND ENGAGEMENT IN EDUCATION

The Lead Member for Education, Children and Young People, accompanied by the Head of Education, presented the Promote School Attendance and Engagement in Education report (previously circulated). The Education Social Work Team Leader/Safeguarding Officer, Principal Education Managers and the headteacher of Denbigh High School were also in attendance for the discussion. The report provided the current position regarding school attendance and engagement in education and outlined the process taken to address matters where concern existed at the individual pupil's level of engagement with their education. It also provided the Committee with information on the measures utilised to support vulnerable pupils to re-engage with their education. It also provided an understanding of the regional and national context in addressing the current level of concern nationally. School attendance was a national priority and was also one of Estyn's priorities.

Officers stated that school attendance rates in the 2018/19 pre-pandemic school year ended with primary schools achieving an overall figure of 94.8% and secondary schools at 93.7%. In the academic year September 2023 to June 2024, primary /secondary combined school attendance was 90.6%. This had increased from 89.2% over the same period in 2022/23 across Wales. In Denbighshire, the overall figure for primary / secondary combined for the academic year 2023 / 2024 was 89.9 %, 0.7 % less than the Wales average. Nationally, 10.3 % of pupils met the persistent absence threshold of 10% of sessions missed for the academic year, again an improvement from 12.9% over the same period in 2022/23. Denbighshire's figure was 15.2% for the same period 2022/23.

Members were informed that Denbighshire County Council had received additional WG funding through the Local Authority Education Grant (LAEG) to address and support education and schools. The Education Service continued to develop cohesive community links across the authority in an attempt to address this trend, with a strong focus on community belonging and access to services. This approach was aimed at ensuring that children had access to their full-time education entitlement and access to broader and more expansive services than just education alone. As part of this, the Service had developed a pupil engagement strategy which drew upon the many services supporting this agenda and set a clear strategic direction for the Service.

Responding to members' question the Lead Member, officers and Headteacher:

- clarified that the “reduced timetable” policy in education referred to situations where schools or educational settings reduced the number of hours or days that a child or young person attended school, usually due to specific needs or behavioural issues. This practice was sometimes necessary to address a student’s challenges, the reduced timetable would only be used as a short-term, temporary solution to help a student reintegrate into full-time education. The Welsh Government did not endorse long-term or permanent use of reduced hours. The goal was to support the child while addressing underlying issues, such as behavioural challenges, anxiety, health issues, or special educational needs.
- Provided assurances that one child's absence, be it authorised or unauthorised would not affect the education of other children. Nevertheless, teachers would assist and support students who had been ill and missed out on work; the level and extent of support provided would differ from student to student and dependent upon the student's needs. If the absence of students was due to long-term illness, schools would follow established codes and practices set out by WG. At LEA level, the information collated would be general data such as absence for illness/medical ground; however, at school level, the data would be collected based on the detail parents/guardians provided.
- Reassurances were provided that unauthorised absences for family holidays purposes was not a widespread problem in Denbighshire.
- confirmed that there were links between low attendance and areas of deprivation. The impact of the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis had compounded the problem, the work to address these matters was complex and would take time to come to fruition.
- advised that Fixed Term Penalties (FPNs) were a deterrent, and warning notices to parents/guardians regarding absence were effective. The systems available to them were effective, with school attendance rates increasing. If financial penalties for unauthorised absence were not paid, the matter could end up in court.
- The new Education, Schools and Children’s Services Attendance Policy for 2024/25 emphasised that pupil absence from schools would need to be taken as a whole council approach as factors outside education impacted on attendance. For most other services, the pandemic was a historical matter, however, its legacy still had a significant impact on schools and education.
- confirmed that the council's financial situation had a negative impact on the Education Service. The Education Social Worker Team had been reduced from twelve to four core members of staff, which made the workload difficult to sustain. Whilst these core staff members were supported by three other staff, the funding for their roles was dependent upon grants from WG, which was reviewed annually in March.
- Advised that there would always be a level of unauthorised absence in school, therefore it was important to utilise a multidisciplinary approach to try and breakdown barriers to pupil engagement. There was an element of apathy amongst some pupils about what their future would look like, with a view to addressing this apathy and insecurity work needed to be undertaken with the commerce and business sectors to try and map out career pathways for young people.

- assured members that no pupils should be missing school due to the Council's School Transport Policy, as that policy was in line with the requirements of the WG's Learner Travel Measure and stated that free transport would be provided to their nearest suitable school subject to the criteria set out in the Measure. A copy of the policy was available on the Council's website.

Following a comprehensive discussion, the Committee:

Resolved: subject to the above observations –

- (i) to endorse the schools and the Local Education Authority's efforts and approach to date to promote the importance of school attendance and engagement in education with both pupils and parents/guardians; and**
- (ii) with a view to monitoring the effectiveness of the new template attendance policy for 2024/25 along with any other initiatives deployed on pupils' school attendance and their engagement with education, to request that a further progress report be presented to members in twelve months' time.**

7 WELSH IN EDUCATION STRATEGIC PLAN TRANSFORMATION

The Lead Member for Education, Children and Young People, alongside the Head of Education, presented the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP) Transformation report (previously circulated). The WESP Development Officer was in attendance to support on technical aspects of the Plan. The report informed the Committee on the progress made to date in delivering the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP) in all the county's schools in line with the Welsh Government's vision for Welsh language provision; the Committee requested the report following discussion on a progress report in September 2023 in respect of the Delivery of Welsh Medium Provision.

Members were reminded that the Council had a ten-year vision for increasing and improving the planning of the provision of Welsh-medium education in the county. This was articulated in the Council's Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP). By September 2032, it's Denbighshire's aspiration that 40% of all seven-year-old pupils would attend Welsh Medium Education. Members were informed that to achieve this vision, the plan sets out seven outcomes that will contribute towards this aspiration. The Council was required to submit an annual report to the Welsh Government on the progress against this Plan, a copy of which was included as an appendix to the report.

The main progress against the plan included a clear vision and support to develop projects. A dedicated Welsh Language Support Team provided excellent support and guidance to school staff in Denbighshire. Information highlighting the benefits of bilingualism and Welsh medium education was available on DCC's website. To date 6 English medium primary schools had changed their language category and become T2 schools, committed (over a period of ten years) to increase the amount of Welsh taught at school with an aspiration of teaching 50% of lessons through the medium of Welsh. The number of latecomers to Welsh medium education and receiving specialised support was increasing. In addition, close collaboration with

the Welsh Advisory Team in Conwy County Borough Council was in place to share good practice, which was developing well.

In response to members' questions the Lead Member, officers and the Headteacher of Denbigh High School –

- advised that the Welsh in Education Strategic Group regularly monitored the progress made with the WESP's delivery.
- confirmed that, as reported in Paragraph 4.6 of the report, it was encouraging that the number of pupils receiving their education in two of the largest Welsh medium schools was beginning to return to pre-Covid levels. There had been a number of factors for the reduction in numbers following Covid, the first being that during lockdown children from non-Welsh speaking households who attended Welsh medium schools had not been able to hear or speak the language for a prolonged period of time therefore the families felt they could not support the child's education, hence their reason for sending them to English-medium education settings once the schools reopened. Another factor was that pre-school activities were closed due to COVID-19, this had a massive impact on Welsh education, as that the first seven years of any child's education was vital and losing the early Welsh language education was a huge detriment to Welsh medium education. Nevertheless, the Education Service had worked closely with the schools, Mudiad Meithrin, yr Urdd, Rhieni dros Addysg Gymraeg (RhAG) – (Parents for Welsh Medium Education)) etc. in a bid to reverse the trend. Latest statistics indicated that this work was now beginning to bear fruit with the numbers attending Welsh-medium education returning to near pre-Covid levels.
- illustrated how the day-to-day use of the Welsh language within English-medium schools was being introduced and progressed. Denbigh High School was an excellent example of how the 'Cymraeg Campus' initiative in encouraging the use of the Welsh language was working. The drive for the initiative's success was coming from the top down and was having a positive impact throughout the school. The Headteacher outlined the development plan that they had put in place which included all staff, not only teaching staff e.g. canteen staff were taking pupils' orders etc. in Welsh. 'A' Level Welsh was a popular subject at the school on Year 7 pupils, who were already familiar with the day-to-day use of the Welsh language at their primary schools were extremely comfortable with the Cymraeg Campus approach on transition to the high school. The school had already been awarded the 'Cymraeg Campus' bronze level award for their encouragement and use of the Welsh language but was about to be awarded the silver level accreditation. The county's 7 English-medium or Dual Language secondary schools had contributed towards the 'Cymraeg Campus Framework' and were all currently striving to achieve different levels of accreditation. The 'Cymraeg Campus Framework' was a DCC initiative, however the WG were currently taking a keen interest in this approach and were closely monitoring its development. The ultimate aim was to 'normalise' the use of the language in day-to-day situations.
- emphasised that one of the significant challenges they faced in being able to deliver the WESP was staffing, especially in recruiting teaching staff in

specialist subject areas through the medium of Welsh. Welsh Government had created various bursaries to encourage people to enter the profession, however this would not resolve the shortage in the short-term.

Councillor Hogg praised the team on developing the 'Sglein Ar-Lein' resource, which his daughter used and which he had found to be particularly useful to him as a learner of the language. He felt it was excellent tool to assist with all things Welsh. He believed ensuring that the Welsh language was around children all the time would result in the language becoming intrinsically linked and engrained into day-to-day life, it would then reach a tipping point which would result in more people speaking the language. Officers agreed to pass on the praise about the 'Sglein Ar-Lein' resource to the relevant officers.

The Committee:

Resolved: subject to the above comments –

- (i) to endorse the progress achieved to date in delivering the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP) in all of the county's schools in line with the Welsh Government's vision for Welsh language provision; and***
- (ii) that future monitoring of the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan's delivery be undertaken by the Welsh in Education Strategic Group on the proviso that if significant issues or obstacles to the Plan's delivery are encountered, they are referred to Scrutiny for detailed examination.***

8 CURRICULUM FOR WALES

The Lead Member for Education, Children and Young People, alongside the Head of Education, presented the Curriculum for Wales report (previously circulated). GwE advisors were also in attendance to support Education Service staff. The report aimed to provide an update on the progress made by schools since the Curriculum for Wales became statutory in September 2022. The report provided information on lessons learnt from evaluations across schools during the initial implementation phase and of the impact on staff and learners.

The report detailed the progress made in implementing and embedding the new Curriculum for Wales in primary schools and years 7 and 8 in secondary schools – what worked well, areas for improvement and lessons learnt by all stakeholders during the initial implementation phase. In addition, it provided an evaluation of the implementation process across all key stages, the Curriculum's impact on staff recruitment and retention, an overview of the feedback received from headteachers, teachers and school-based staff on their experiences of the implementation process and the advantages and/or disadvantages of the new Curriculum for learners.

The Committee was informed that In September 2022, the new Curriculum for Wales became statutory for all learners from Nursery to Year 6. All secondary schools and settings had started their first teaching of the Curriculum for Wales in Years 7 and 8 by September 2023.

All primary schools had designed their curriculum in line with the Four Purposes to meet the mandatory requirements of Curriculum for Wales, with a balanced curriculum offered to meet all learners' needs. The staggered rollout in secondary schools had a different effect to that of the shorter implementation of rollout in primary schools, with leaders and practitioners involved in ongoing and significant change every year between 2022 and 2026. Year 9 would begin the new curriculum in September 2024. Two further stages of implementation would follow as these learners started the new 14-16 qualifications in 2025 and the current Year 8 learners in 2026. Curriculum summary documents had been developed by each school and made available to parents and local community as required by Welsh Government.

Officers added that the rollout of the new curriculum was a major piece of reform. In addition to the ALN changes, the work carried out with the Welsh Education Strategic Plan (WESP) and post-Covid recovery work it had entailed a tremendous amount of work for the Education Service and school staff. However, all the schools had embraced the changes and the work entailed with the reform.

In response to the Committee's questions the Lead Member, Officers and GwE representatives: –

- advised that the lessons learnt from the primary sector had assisted the rollout in the secondary sector, emphasising that the cluster way of working had assisted greatly with the workload involved with the rollout in the secondary sector, particularly the planning for progression. However, there were differences in how primary and secondary sectors worked, such as primary having a holistic approach to education, whereas secondary was more discipline-based. The introduction of the new Curriculum had challenged the service and the schools to think what they were teaching, why, and how it was taught. The new Curriculum involved a lot more outdoor and motivational learning, therefore more attention was given to utilising skills and content into the learning.
- confirmed that funding to support professional learning was always a challenge. However, schools were creative in ensuring that they achieved the maximum benefits from any grant funding received. They would continue to engage in professional learning as much as possible, share best practice and resources, utilising approaches such as school to school learning in addition to accessing an element of bespoke professional training. Each school was required to draw up an improvement plan, GwE as part of its work would challenge the school's capacity to achieve and deliver its improvement plan, part of this challenge process was focussed on the school's confidence in securing the required training to enable it to deliver its Improvement Plan.

Members commented on how encouraging it was to see pupils being taught coding and other IT skills to assist them with future employment. The Welsh Government was encouraging IT education and skills. However, this created challenges as hiring staff with the appropriate digital knowledge and skills was at times difficult. Staff confidence in their own digital skills was at times an issue, however the 'School

Cluster' approach proved useful in most instances as there more often than not was an 'expert' or 'digital confident' member of staff in one or more of the schools who could provide support to colleagues in other schools. At times it was just a matter of providing support to nurture colleagues' confidence in their own skills. There tended to be a shortage of teachers who were confident in teaching IT skills through the medium of Welsh. Modern foreign languages and British Sign Language (BSL) were other specialist area where there seemed to be a shortage of individuals who were competent to teach the subjects, particularly in the primary sector. When this occurred, support was sought from local secondary school to enable the teaching of these subjects. This also has its benefits as those schools were able to get to know their future pupils well in advance of them transitioning. Following a comprehensive discussion, the Committee:

Resolved: subject to the above observations to –

- (i) acknowledge the work undertaken to date in implementing and embedding the Curriculum for Wales in the county's primary schools, and in years 7 and 8 in secondary schools, including identified best practices, lessons learnt and areas for improvement for the continuing staggered roll-out of the Curriculum in the secondary education sector; and***

request that a further progress and evaluation report on the Curriculum's implementation be submitted to the Committee in September 2026 following the introduction of Wave 1 of the new GCSE qualifications.

9 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator introduced the report and appendices (previously circulated) which sought the Committee to review its programme of future work.

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator informed the Committee that at their next meeting on 28 November they had a full work programme, two of which would be substantial items 'Recruitment, Retention & Workforce Planning' and the monitoring report on 'Christ the Word School'.

Members were also made aware that the Scrutiny Chairs and Vice Chairs Group had met the previous week. No items had been added to the Performance Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Plan. The Group's next meeting was scheduled for 25 November.

The 'Information Brief' document circulated to Committee members via e-mail earlier that week contained information reports detailing the latest performance updates against the Council's 'Your Voice' Corporate Complaints Procedure and the 'Medium-Term Financial Strategy and Plan'. Members were advised if, having examined these reports, they had any concerns regarding the Council's performance they could request that any areas of concern be examined in detail by Scrutiny. This could be done via the completion of the Member Proposal Form, attached as Appendix 2 to the Scrutiny Work Programme report.

The Committee:

Resolved: to confirm its future forward work programme as set out in Appendix 1 to the report.

10 FEEDBACK FROM COMMITTEE REPRESENTATIVES

The Vice-Chair reported on a recent meeting he had attended with representatives from the Peer Review Group that had recently visited the Authority. The Committee:

Resolved: to note the report.

Meeting concluded at 1pm.