

PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Performance Scrutiny Committee held in by video conference on Thursday, 28 January 2021 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

Councillors Ellie Chard, Martyn Holland, Hugh Irving (Vice-Chair), Geraint Lloyd-Williams, Paul Penlington, Pete Prendergast, Arwel Roberts (Chair), Peter Scott, Andrew Thomas and David Williams

Co-opted Members for Education – Kathleen Jones and Neil Roberts

Lead Member for Education, Children and Young People/ Head of Education and Children Services – Councillor Huw Hilditch-Roberts

Councillors Mabon ap Gwynfor, Meirick Lloyd Davies and Emrys Wynne attended as observers.

ALSO PRESENT

Corporate Director: Communities (NS), Head of Business Improvement and Modernisation (AS), Education Planning and Resources Manager (IL), Principal Education Manager (JB). Programme Manager (JC) GWE officers (Jacqui Chan and Mair Herbert), Scrutiny Co-ordinator (RE), Committee Administrator (RTJ) and Democratic Services Officer– Host (KE).

1 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Bob Murray and from the Chief Executive, Judith Greenhalgh who had been called to emergency meeting relating to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Interim Head of Education, Geraint Davies. Alan Smith, Head of Business Improvement and Modernisation was deputing for the Chief Executive at the meeting.

2 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The following elected and co-opted members declared personal interests as school governors at the schools named in relating to business items 5 and 6:

Councillor Ellie Chard	–	Ysgol Tir Morfa
Councillor Huw Hilditch –Roberts	-	Ysgol Pen Barras and his children
attended Welsh-medium education		
Councillor Hugh Irving	–	Prestatyn High School
Councillor Meirick Lloyd-Davies	-	Ysgol Cefn Meiriadog
Councillor Paul Penlington	-	Ysgol y Llys and his children attended
Welsh-medium education		
Councillor Arwel Roberts	-	Ysgol y Castell
Neil Roberts	-	Ysgol y Parc

Councillor Peter Scott - St. Asaph V P School
Councillor Emrys Wynne - Ysgol Borthyn & Ysgol Brynhyfryd

3 URGENT MATTERS AS AGREED BY THE CHAIR

No urgent items had been raised with the Chair ahead of the meeting.

4 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The following minutes of the Performance Scrutiny Committee meetings were submitted:

- (i) Meeting held on 26 November 2020
- (ii) Special Meeting held on 22 December 2020

The Committee:

***Resolved:* - to receive both sets of minutes and approve them as a true and correct record of the meetings held on 26 November and 22 December 2020 respectively.**

Councillor Emrys Wynne (Chair of the Use of Plastics Task and Finish Group) advised that the Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs Group (SCVCG) hoped to devise a workable solution for monitoring the delivery of the recommendations in relation to the reduction of the use of plastic and the wider Climate and Ecological Change Strategy in the county in due course.

5 WORK PROGRAMME AND SUPPORT TO SCHOOLS DURING THE COVID PANDEMIC

The Lead Member for Education, Children and Young People alongside the Corporate Director: Communities introduced the Work Programme and Support to Schools during the Covid Pandemic report (previously circulated). The report summarised how education and schools had tried to deliver the best education in difficult times. Outlined within the report and appendices were the educational offer provided to all pupils in the county, an assessment of the main outcomes and impact of that work to date along with any other outcomes and impacts identified. It also outlined details of further work required to strengthen all aspects of education delivery in future. The time had been very challenging. Two officers from GWE were also in attendance to answer queries.

The regional service, GwE, in its entirety had refocused several times during this period to meet the needs of the range of stakeholders. The ability to be flexible and agile to work effectively together in different teams, often cross sector, had significant impact on organisational behaviour and external perception

Regular contact with school leaders had been well received and had contributed to Head teachers feeling that they could turn to a professional colleague to share challenging issues and to find solutions to address day-to-day issues.

Support for senior leaders' well-being had been provided through a series of workshops and webinars which supported their resilience during this difficult period. These were held weekly and were extremely beneficial. GwE staff were also conducting face to face pastoral visits to schools during the autumn term on behalf of the Local Authorities.

The six local authorities and GwE had taken a collective regional approach to supporting schools throughout the COVID pandemic. This was clearly demonstrated in the consistent regional approach in developing a supportive framework to ensure that all regional schools had the right policies in place together with a comprehensive risk assessment in order to create a safe environment to welcome the children back into schools.

Schools causing concern prior to lockdown had received support throughout the period. Teachers had been guiding pupils and parents through blended learning. The schools were delivering on education and parents received reports on their child's development. Many schools acknowledged that parental engagement had been a key factor in securing effective distance/blended learning. GwE and the Local Authorities had and continued to provide a range of guidance to support schools to improve parental engagement, including the sharing of good practice.

The Committee was assured that any pupils who required any IT equipment for school their school work were assisted to gain access to it. The Lead Member informed the Committee that to the Service's knowledge no pupils were without the required IT equipment.

The Lead Member placed on record his personal thanks to all Education, Children's Service, Health and Safety, school support, catering and maintenance staff for all their hard work which had enabled schools to reopen and also to provide blended learning.

During the ensuing discussion the Committee –

- The Committee thanked all staff for all their hard work during this difficult time.
- raised concerns about the IT issues some children may experience whilst conducting hybrid learning, i.e. there may be bandwidth issues arising from a number of family members attempting to use the internet at the same time, due to home-schooling and home working. Some households may be in area where internet access was patchy or extremely poor. Also some larger families may have to share hardware which could affect learning. The lead officer clarified that if there were any issues with hybrid learning, parents were advised to raise the matter with the school, who would in turn contact the Council if the school itself could not solve the problem. However, any internet connection issues were not within the control of the local authority.
- queried whether teaching assistants and cleaners were at high risk and whether they were likely to be given priority for vaccination. Members felt that it was important that the Council supported those who were nervous of the virus. The Corporate Director: Communities informed the Committee that the vaccine rollout was determined by the Government, based on scientific

advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI), local government had no control over it. However, the prioritisation list did include staff who worked in special schools and who provided personal care to pupils. In the meantime, the Council would continue to support school staff with information and advice from both Welsh Government (WG) and Public Health Wales (PHW).

- raised concerns about the effectiveness of learning, as everything revolved around digital learning. Was sufficient support available and were more practical skills such as craft work being taught. Was any encouragement given to parents to teach through different methods. Officer advised that activity packs were available and provided to pupils to help them to learn via various methods rather than just through hybrid learning.
- raised concerns in relation to the short lead-in time between WG announcements and their implementation dates, and the pressures this caused local government. The Lead Member assured the Committee that both he and GwE officials repeatedly raised concerns about this with the WG and would continue to do so. Denbighshire County Council had taken the decision to keep schools closed until later in January to allow teachers to be prepared for the New Year, contrary to what the WG wanted.
- queried whether there had been support available for non-Welsh speaking parents to support children learning through the medium of Welsh. Children attending Welsh-medium education would receive more Welsh interaction in schools and this could not be matched digitally. The Service was working with parents and children to try and encourage as much Welsh as possible. This was one of the biggest challenges with hybrid learning at the moment.

Resolved: - subject to the above observations –

- (i) to accept the comprehensive information received on how the regional consortium, in partnership with the local authority, had evolved and adapted their support to schools during the COVID-19 pandemic and how schools had adapted to the new ways of working in response to the restrictions in force, along with the lessons learnt and the impact on future education delivery practices;***
- (ii) to commend all GwE, Local Authority Education and Children's Services staff and all school based staff on their achievements in adapting and delivering high quality education to the county's pupils both remotely and in safe school environments whilst also providing well-being support; and***
- (iii) that a message be sent to all local authority Education and Children's Services staff along with all staff involved with delivering services to schools to thank them for their diligent work in securing the safe delivery of education and well-being services to pupils during the course of the pandemic.***

6 LEARNER TRANSPORT: PROVISION FOR WELSH MEDIUM EDUCATION AND THE DEFINITION OF CATEGORY 1 SCHOOLS IN THE COUNTY

The Lead Member for Education, Children and Young People, Councillor Huw Hilditch-Roberts presented the report (previously circulated). The report provided

an overview of school transport requirements as they applied to Welsh language schools under the Learner Travel (Wales) Measure 2008, which had been incorporated into Denbighshire County Council's own Learner Transport Policy in 2018. It also provided an overview of the Welsh Language Categorisation of schools and how School Transport provision linked into education-medium provision. The report was being presented to the Committee in response to a request by members.

The Committee was informed that there was one recent and one ongoing consultations by Welsh Government (WG) that could potentially lead to changes to both the Learner Transport Policy and School Categorisation criteria in due course. Consequently, the Lead Member felt that the report was brought to the Committee prematurely. The results of the consultations and the proposed changes stemming from them would need to be assessed once the consultations were completed, as they could have substantial impact on how schools delivered education especially with regard to the Welsh Language. The consultation's findings were expected to be published by the WG during the spring of 2021.

During the discussions, the following points were raised:

- The Chair was aware that pupils who attended Ysgol Bro Cinmerch would have to pay for transport to attend at Ysgol Glan Clwyd (dependent upon the location of their home address) or attend Ysgol Brynhyfryd, as the latter was defined as their nearest suitable school for the provision of Welsh-medium education, as 80% of its curriculum offer was available via the medium of Welsh. The Lead Member agreed to discuss the matter with the affected parents and pupils. Previously, pupils may have been able to apply for concessionary travel on school transport to attend the school of their choice, however recent changes to the Public Service Vehicle Accessibility Regulations (PSVAR) had meant that this was no longer an option for pupils and parents
- The Committee wanted to ensure that parents and children were supported while accessing secondary education through the language medium of their choice.
- whether dual household children were deemed to qualify for free school transport from their prime household to their nearest suitable school. Officers advised that generally their home address for education transport would be taken as the one registered for the pupil's Child Benefit payments. Nevertheless, this did sometimes cause a problem and this had been highlighted to the WG as part of the Council's response to the recent consultation.
- The definition of Welsh-medium education which was available across Denbighshire was raised, as there was concern amongst parents who wanted their children to be educated through the medium of Welsh. Ysgol Glan Clwyd was a Category A school which was able to offer 100% of its curriculum through the medium of Welsh, whereas Ysgol Brynhyfryd was a Category B Welsh-medium school, that guaranteed to offer at least 80% of

its curriculum through the medium of Welsh. This provision complied with WG definitions of both categorisations. Members were concerned that by the time pupils reached years 11, 12 and 13 there may not be sufficient resources available in Category B schools for Welsh-medium provision to be offered.

- The Lead Member and the Education Planning and Resources Manager informed the committee that once the consultations had been concluded and the findings were known further reports would be submitted to the Committee.

Resolved: - subject to the above observations to confirm that no change was currently required to the Authority's Policy due to:

- i). the Learner Transport Policy 2018 fully meeting the current statutory requirements under Learner Travel (Wales) Measure 2008; which had been tested legally prior to being adopted in 2018;***
- ii). currently changing how Category 1 & 2 Welsh Language Secondary Schools were dealt with in terms of transport would undermine the provision of Education in Denbighshire's Category 2 Welsh Schools.***
- iii). the risk of making the Authority open to be challenged in regard to decisions previously made, or future decisions made if they contradicted Legislation, Policy and Guidance.***
- iv). the fact that the Welsh Government had recently consulted on potential future changes to The Learner Travel (Wales) Measure 2008 in January 2021, and the outcome of that process could again change future requirements across a number of areas, including Welsh medium schools.***
- v). the fact that Welsh Government was currently undertaking a consultation on 'School categories according to Welsh-medium provision' and the outcome of that process may also change the current categorisation for all Welsh medium schools and any linked Legislation;***
- vi). that a letter be sent to Welsh Government emphasising the need for them to ensure that all legislation relating to education provision and Learner Transport provision dovetail to support the delivery of the widest possible choice of educational opportunities for pupils in Wales;***
- vii). that further reports are provided to the Committee upon the publication of the Welsh Government's revised Learner Transport Measure and the conclusions of the Review of School Categorisation According to Welsh-medium Policy outlining the respective reviews' implications for Denbighshire schools and pupils; and***
- viii). that the Lead Member for Education, Children and Young People discuss with parents of pupils attending Ysgol Bro Cinmeirch how best to meet their needs for access to secondary education provision of their choice.***

7 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator introduced the report (previously circulated) seeking Members' review of the Committee's work programme and providing an update on relevant issues. Members were reminded that the proposal form for scrutiny topics (appendix 2) should be completed for the Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs Group to review and allocate items of business.

- Members were informed that a request had been received for the report on the Cefndy Healthcare during 2019/20 to be deferred until June 2021 to enable it to cover two full financial years. The presentation of the 2019/20 had initially been deferred due to the pandemic, therefore as the company was now in the final quarter of the 2020/21 financial year it would be prudent for two full years to be reported upon.
- As a result of the on-going pandemic response work officers had requested that the report on Hafan Deg be deferred until July 2021. The Committee agreed to this deferral.
- The Scrutiny Co-Ordinator confirmed that the Commercial Waste Service Evaluation would be presented to the Committee on the 18th March
- Members were informed that the Library Service Standards 2019-20 would also be available for presentation in March; and
- the Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs Group had met the previous week. No items had been referred by them to the Committee for examination.

Resolved: subject to the above amendments to approve the Committee's forward work programme.

8 FEEDBACK FROM COMMITTEE REPRESENTATIVES

The Chair advised members that he had recently attended a meeting of the Council's Strategic Investment Group (SIG) during which a number of projects, which were currently subject to confidentiality restrictions, had been discussed.

Meeting concluded at 12.40pm