

PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Performance Scrutiny Committee held in the Council Chamber, County Hall, Ruthin and by video conference on Thursday, 25 January 2024 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

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

ALSO PRESENT

Corporate Director: Governance and Business (GW); Head of Housing and Communities (LG); Head of Education (GD); Education Social Work Team Leader/ Safeguarding Officer (WW); Principal Education Manager (RT); Principal Librarian (DO); Scrutiny Co-Ordinator (RE); Zoom Host (NPH) and Committee Administrator (SLW)

Also present – at the Committee’s invitation

Lead Member for Education, Children and Families, Councillor Gill German in attendance for Agenda Item 5

Lead Member for Welsh Language, Culture and Heritage, Councillor Emrys Wynne in attendance for Agenda Item 6

Observers –

Councillors Jeanette Chamberlain-Jones

Education Co-opted Members –

Colette Owen and Neil Roberts in attendance for Agenda Item 5

1 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Education Co-opted Member David Lloyd.

The Committee was advised by the Scrutiny Co-ordinator that Mr Lloyd had also recently decided not to re-stand for election to the Governing Body of one of the county’s secondary schools. Therefore, his term as a parent governor and as their co-opted representative on the Council’s scrutiny committees would also come to an end in late January 2024. The Chair thanked Mr Lloyd for his contributions during his tenures as both primary and secondary parent governor co-opted member representative on Scrutiny.

The Committee also welcomed Colette Owen to her first scrutiny committee meeting as the Catholic Church’s newly appointed education co-opted member on the Council’s scrutiny committees.

2 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The following members declared a personal interest in business 5, 'Promote School Attendance and Engagement in Education', in their role as school governors:

Councillor Ellie Chard	Local Education Authority (LEA) Governor at Ysgol Tir Morfa
Councillor Bobby Feeley	LEA Governor at Rhos Street School
Councillor Martyn Hogg	Parent Governor at St. Asaph VP School
Councillor Carol Holliday	Town Council/Community governor on the governing bodies of Ysgol Penmorfa & Ysgol Clawdd Offa
Councillor Alan Hughes	Governor at Ysgol Caer Drewyn
Councillor Paul Keddie	Governor Ysgol Bryn Collen
Councillor Diane King	Governor at Christchurch School
Neil Roberts	Governor at Ysgol y Parc
Councillor Gareth Sandilands	LEA Governor at Ysgol Clawdd Offa

Councillor Andrea Tomlin declared a personal interest in the same business item as a personal acquaintance of a team member delivering the service.

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 30 November 2023 were submitted.

Matters arising

Business item 6, Council Performance Self-Assessment Update – in response to an enquiry raised in relation to the availability of information on school attainment measures and how they will in future be reported, the Head of Education undertook to follow-up the enquiry with Welsh Government officials.

It was:

Resolved: that the minutes of the Performance Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 30 November 2023 be approved as a true, accurate and correct record of the proceedings.

5 PROMOTE SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AND ENGAGEMENT IN EDUCATION

The Lead Member for Education, Children and Young People, Councillor Gill German, introduced the Promote School Attendance and Engagement in Education report (previously circulated). She explained that school attendance rates had not

quite reached pre-pandemic levels, therefore more work was required in order to improve engagement and attendance levels.

Information and explanations were provided regarding the measures in place to support vulnerable pupils to re-engage in education and deepen an understanding of the regional and national context in addressing the current level of concern nationally.

Attendance rates over the last three years across Wales had dropped with an overall average across authorities achieving 88.9% Primary/Secondary combined. Appendix 3 to the report provided a more detailed breakdown of the current trend, these figures indicated that Denbighshire's average attendance figures stood at 90.1% during the autumn 2023 term compared to the national average of 91.3%

The Welsh Government's (WG) Minister for Education and Welsh Language had recently announced plans to bring Wales in line with England where persistent absence was defined as 10% of half day sessions missed (30 sessions) rather than the current 20% absence rate of persistent absence which equated to 60 half day sessions a year.

Denbighshire had received additional Welsh Government funding through the Local Authority Education Grant (LAEG) to address and support education and schools.

Work had been taking place with schools in the key aspect of where families were in difficulty with poor housing, living in poverty and struggling with the cost of living crisis, as this would impact on the children. Engagement with schools and families would be imperative to improve attendance. Officers would visit families in an attempt to establish the reasons why pupils were not attending schools and engaging with their education, support was offered with a view to encouraging re-engagement and improving attendance levels.

Responding to members' questions the Lead Member for Education, Children and Families and officers advised that:

- Interventions were critical, but the main difficulties were down to staff levels not increasing to cope with an increase in demand and pressures. Additional Welsh Government (WG) funding had been received but it had been a challenge to appoint to posts.
- Interventions also varied from school to school as some schools had strong attendance, returning or even exceeding pre-pandemic levels whilst others required additional support and resources to realise improvement.
- Work was taking place with families of children with additional learning needs (ALN), those in receipt of free school meals (FSMs), refugees, gypsy, roma and traveller (GRT) families, looked after children (LAC) etc as these were pupils with certain vulnerabilities.
- From the point of view of the FSM cohort, these children and families often had housing needs and it was important children attended school to be in a safe environment and to be provided with at least one hot meal every day.
- There were a lot of children with wellbeing and mental health needs, but this was not an excuse for a child not to attend school. Some children were also

carers for family members, therefore it was important that their needs were met to permit them to attend school to improve their future outcomes. Attending school would benefit every child. A One Council approach was in place with a view to encouraging pupil attendance, engagement and well-being, this approach also extended to external organisations i.e. health practitioners involved with children and their families/carers.

- a communication strategy had been produced following an Estyn report and discussions at Head Teachers conferences. This strategy ‘drip-fed’ messages via social media channels etc. on the importance of pupils attending schools on a regular basis, not being late in arriving at school, not families not taking holidays during term time. These messages were not aimed at alienating parents and families, their focus was on the fact that the Authority cared for every pupil, their welfare, their aspirations and their futures. The communications strategy was evaluated and revised on a monthly basis to ensure its targeted approach was relevant to the current trends.
- the county’s education workforce were extremely creative in devising ways of breaking down barriers in a bid to get pupils engage and interested in learning.
- the additional funding granted by WG had enabled Education Social Work Team to expand from 4 to 7 members of staff. Nevertheless, the demand for support still outstripped what the team could currently provide.
- that a ‘whole school approach to emotional and mental well-being’ had been implemented across the county’s school. This approach had been outlined in a report to the Committee in September 2023.
- Fixed Penalty Notices (FPN) were issued to the parents or carers of child who was not attending school as they were breaking the law. Unfortunately, the FPN’s were not effective in all cases but that was the process which was in place as it was the current guidance to adhere to. FPNs were issued as the very last resort, when all other means of communication, engagement and encouragement with parents or carers had failed.
- The report published the previous week by Estyn on ‘Improving attendance in secondary schools’ contained a number of recommendations for schools, local education authorities and also for WG. Denbighshire and its schools already utilised the majority of the approaches listed in the recommendations but would be looking to develop some of them even further in future.
- the additional LAEG funding received would not be able to be spent on school transport for students. The terms and conditions attached to this funding stipulated that it was to be utilised solely for education welfare and support purposes.
- WG was currently reviewing its school transport policy in relation to the qualifying distance from home to pupils nearest most suitable school. The outcome of this review was still awaited.
- That the proposed changes to ‘persistent absences’ threshold would place added pressures on school-based staff, education, and education welfare services staff. WG would be expected to discuss the implementation of these changes and their anticipated impacts on local education authorities and staff with Education portfolio holders and education officers across Wales. Denbighshire was extremely dependent on WG grant funding to pay for education welfare services.

- The Authority preferred to be proactive and utilise a prevention rather than an intervention approach towards managing school attendance. There was a national coding system which every school followed, and this coding system provided data for reasons of absence e.g. 'M' (medical appointment), 'I' (ill – self certification by parent/carer). If there was an "N" code (no reason given) the school would be questioned as there should be a reason for every absence. Schools were monitored on a daily, weekly/monthly/termly basis via the national School Information Management System (SIMS).

Members enquired whether it would be possible to produce an infographic that could simply illustrate the extent and implications of pupil non-attendance at the county's schools which they could then easily share with residents to highlight any problems and seek residents support to encourage pupils to engage with their education. In response to a question from a Committee member on what elected members, in their role as Corporate Parents, could do to support officers and encourage pupils to attend school and engage with their education, the Lead Member and officers advised that they would be grateful if members could reinforce and share the messages sent out by the Education Service and the Council's Communications Team, emphasising the importance of school attendance with families in their areas and via school governing bodies on which they served. When sharing these messages members were asked to stress that the Council was encouraging school attendance and engagement not because they were not blaming families for not ensuring their children attended school, but because they cared for the pupils and their families,

At this juncture, the Chair thanked the Lead Member and all the officers for attending and also for all their work.

At the conclusion of a comprehensive discussion the Committee:

Resolved: subject to the above observations to –

- (i) receive the report along with the information imparted during the course of the meeting and acknowledge the efforts made to date to promote school attendance and pupils' engagement in education; and***
- (ii) request that a further report be presented to members in September 2024 detailing the progress made in improving school attendance rates and educational engagement across the county's schools during the 2023/24 academic year in line with Welsh Government Guidance.***

**At this juncture (11.30 a.m.) there was a 15 minute break.
The meeting reconvened at 11.45 a.m.**

6 LIBRARY SERVICE STANDARDS AND PERFORMANCE

The Lead Member for the Welsh Language, Culture and Heritage, Councillor Emrys Wynne, introduced the Library Service Standards and Performance report (previously circulated). As part of his introduction the Lead Member emphasised that the Service had performed well during 2022-23 but acknowledged that he had

concerns about the Service's ability to sustain its high-performance levels in the medium-term given the financial situation for the foreseeable future.

The report provided information regarding the Council's performance in relation to the 6th Framework of Welsh Public Library Standards 2017-20 (extended for 21-23) and the progress made in developing libraries as places of individual and community well-being and resilience.

The report related to Denbighshire's Library Service for the financial year 2022-23 which was still within the covid period. The impact on performance of proposed changes to the Library/One Stop Shop service was not expected to manifest until April 2024 at the earliest.

The new National Standards were expected to be established with the publication of the 7th Framework of Welsh Public Library Standards, which had a provisional implementation date of 1st April 2025.

The Head of Housing and Communities, Liz Grieve, introduced the new Principal Librarian, Deborah Owen to the Committee.

Prior to discussions the Head of Housing and Communities made a point of clarification that the report was not regarding the cuts to Library Service hours within Denbighshire. She then proceeded to outline the process followed for undertaking the assessment, stressing that under the current standards the Council was performing well. Performance had improved greatly following the end of Covid restrictions, although public use of computers in libraries had reduced following the pandemic. Other service provision had been adapted to respond to post-pandemic public needs.

Responding to members' questions the Lead Member and officers confirmed that the Service:

- the Welsh Government's Culture Division (WGCD) did not compare individual local authority library services against others.
- was proposing to expand digital engagement within the library service, possibly by using volunteers to help improve residents' digital skills and supporting organisations to seek funding to help support non-IT literate individuals to gain and improve their IT skills in a 'friendly/supporting' environment.
- currently made limited use of volunteers.
- looking to the future would be exploring opportunities to increase income generation from external organisations with a view to sustaining and improving services despite budget cuts. It would also be seeking information from Library Services elsewhere on what steps they had taken to try and sustain services despite budget cuts.
- despite the fact that there was no longer a School Library Service, library staff worked closely with the county's schools and had recently been engaging with years 7 and 8 pupils with a view to encouraging them to visit their local library and use it as a research facility. School libraries themselves were also regarded by pupils as safe spaces and it was

encouraging to see so many pupils volunteering to help out in their school libraries.

- as part of its planning for the future would be undertaking a survey seeking the public's views and ideas on the types of services they would like to see their local libraries providing.
- Did not hold detailed information on how many people utilised library services and what services were specifically used but could provide data on the number of ward members who were active library members.

Confirmation was given that the impact of changes to library opening hours would be included within the 2024/25 report, the 2023/24 report would be based on the current opening hours and usage. Members questioned the delay in providing the report and it was clarified that the Council provided information to WGCD in June each year and receive a response from WGCD usually in December of each year which was the report submitted to Scrutiny Committee each year. Members requested an Information Report be provided in mid-2024 detailing the Service's draft performance statistics as submitted to the Welsh Government's Culture Division in accordance with the requirements of the Framework, prior to receiving the 2023/24 Annual Assessment Report against the Standards in January 2025.

A working group would shortly be established to assess the impact of the reduction in opening hours of the Library/One Stop Shop and to explore alternative solutions to enhance service delivery going forward. Shortly, each Member Area Group (MAG) would be requested to appoint a member to serve on this Group.

The Lead Member stressed that whilst library opening hours were being reduced as part of the Council's strategy for setting a balanced budget, it was also important to remember that no library would be closed, and the buildings would still be available for community use.

Following the conclusion of an in-depth discussion members:

Resolved: subject to the above comments –

- (i) to endorse and acknowledge the Library Service's performance against the 6th Framework of Welsh Public Library Standards;***
- (ii) to request an 'Information Report' in mid-2024 detailing the Service's draft performance statistics as submitted to the Welsh Government's Culture Division in accordance with the requirements of the Framework, prior to receiving the 2023/24 Annual Assessment Report against the Standards in January 2025; and***
- (iii) that the initial findings of the Working Group established to measure the impact of the reduction in Library/One Stop Shop opening hours and explore alternative proposals or solutions to enhance or expand service delivery going forward, be presented to the Committee in late 2024.***

7 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator introduced the report and appendices, (previously

circulated) the purpose of which was to seek the Committee to review its programme of future work.

The next meeting of the Performance Scrutiny Committee was scheduled for 7 March 2024 which had four items and the meeting to be held on 18 April 2024 had 3 items.

Appendix contained a copy of the Members' Scrutiny Proposal forms and members were encouraged to complete the form if they had any items which they thought would merit Scrutiny. The Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs Group (SCVCG) would be meeting the following week to consider any requests received. At their last meeting in November 2023 the SCVCG had added one item to the Committee's forward work programme for consideration in November 2024, this related to the 'Council's processes and procedures for applying for high value grant funding'.

Appendix 3 showed the Cabinet forward work programme for information.

Appendix 4 outlined the progress made with respect of the Committee's recommendations from its previous meetings.

The Committee's attention was drawn to paragraph 4.8 of the report which detailed the rationale for reducing the frequency of providing Corporate Plan Performance Monitoring reports to the Committee from now on. It was emphasised that it was only the Quarters 1 and 3 reports which were being withdrawn. These reports were produced for the Committee's information and not formally presented for discussion. Quarters 2 and 4/Annual Performance reports would continue to be presented for formal discussion. In the meantime, if members wished to undertake their own research on the Council's performance in delivering services or track progress with delivering specific projects, they could do so by using the Verto corporate performance management system. All members could request access to the Verto system.

At the conclusion of the discussion the Committee:

Resolved: subject to the inclusion of the items added during the course of the meeting's discussions, to confirm its forward work programme as set out in Appendix 1 to the report.

8 FEEDBACK FROM COMMITTEE REPRESENTATIVES

The Chair, Scrutiny's representative on the Queen's Market Project Board, advised that the Board had not met since the Committee's last meeting.

Councillor Holliday, the Committee's representative on the Adult Social Care and Homelessness Service Challenge Group, gave an overview of the discussions that had taken place at the recent Service Challenge meeting. Accommodation conditions and the increasing cost pressures entailed with accommodating homeless families was a key feature of the discussions.

The Vice-Chair advised that the Capital Scrutiny Group (CSG) had not met since the Committee's last meeting. Its next meeting was scheduled to be held the following day and Councillor Sandilands undertook to report back on the discussions of that meeting to the Committee at its March meeting.

Meeting concluded at 12.35pm