

## **EDUCATION AND YOUTH OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**6 JANUARY 2016**

Minutes of the meeting of the Education and Youth Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held at Council Chamber, County Hall, Mold CH7 6NA on Wednesday, 6th January, 2016

**PRESENT: David Hytch (Vice-Chair in the Chair)**

Councillors: Marion Bateman, Paul Cunningham, Adele Davies-Cooke, Andy Dunbobbin, David Healey, Colin Legg, Dave Mackie, Nancy Matthews, Vicky Perfect and Nigel Steele-Mortimer

**CO-OPTED MEMBERS:** Rebecca Stark and Rev. John Thelwell

**APOLOGIES:** Councillors Ray Hughes and Carolyn Thomas. Bernard Stuart.

**SUBSTITUTION:** Councillor Paul Shotton (for Ian Roberts)

**ALSO PRESENT:** Councillors Glyn Banks, Christine Jones and Tony Sharps

**CONTRIBUTORS:** Councillor Chris Bithell, Cabinet Member for Education, Chief Officer (Education and Youth), and Senior Manager, School Planning and Provision

**IN ATTENDANCE:**

Education and Youth Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator, and Committee Officer

The Chairman welcomed members of the public to the meeting and invited Officers to introduce themselves. He advised that the purpose of the meeting was to inform the Committee of the responses from the statutory consultation period for the proposal to close Ysgol Maes Edwin, Flint Mountain. He briefly explained that the role of the Committee was to scrutinise the Authority's policy and procedures and make recommendations where necessary, however, it was not a decision making body and it would be for the Cabinet to make the actual decision on the proposal to close Ysgol Maes Edwin at its meeting on 19 January 2016.

### **47. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)**

Councillor Paul Cunningham declared a personal interest in the following item as he was a School Governor of Ysgol Gwynedd.

Agenda item 3 – School Modernisation – School Standards and Reorganisation Act 2013 – Ysgol Maes Edwin.

Councillor Dave Mackie declared that he had visited Ysgol Maes Edwin at the invitation of the school.

The Chairman invited members of the Committee to make a declaration if they were school governors and a number of members so indicated.

48. **SCHOOL MODERNISATION - SCHOOL STANDARDS AND REORGANISATION ACTION 2013 - YSGOL MAES EDWIN**

The Chief Officer (Education and Youth) introduced a report to inform the Committee of the responses from the statutory consultation period for the proposal to close Ysgol Maes Edwin, Flint Mountain. He advised that comments from the Committee were invited in advance of the Cabinet being requested to conclude on a formal proposal.

The Chief Officer provided background information and referred to the key considerations as detailed in the report. He advised that the proposal to close Ysgol Maes Edwin was put forward on the basis of criteria laid down in the Council's School Modernisation Strategy regarding unfilled places across the primary school portfolio, diminishing resource criteria, small school criteria and Welsh Government categorisation. He reported that formal consultation for Ysgol Maes Edwin commenced on 21 October 2015 and ended on 2 December 2015. The Council had issued consultation documents in accordance with the statutory School Organisation Code and responses had been received from children and young people, community, staff, parents and carers. A copy of the consultation document (children's version) was appended to the report which contained the key issues raised during the consultation period.

The Chief Officer outlined the process if the Cabinet decision was to proceed with the proposal to close Ysgol Maes Edwin. He explained that the Council would publish a Statutory Notice providing a 28 day notice period for objections. If objections were received the Council must publish an objection report providing a summary of the objections and their responses to them within 28 days of the end of the objection period. The anticipated timeline should the current proposals be implemented was outlined in appendix 4 of the report.

The Chief Officer reported on the issue of unfilled places across the primary school portfolio and referred to the reduction in full time pupils at Ysgol Maes Edwin since September 2015. He also drew attention to the high number of pupils attending Ysgol Maes Edwin who were not attending their local school. The Chief Officer explained that the School population and capacity was lower than the national designation of a small school and school numbers did not meet the minimum requirements of primary school models as noted in the Council's School Modernisation Strategy. He commented on the issue of sustainability concerning curriculum provision and social experience for learners. The Chief Officer referred to the significance of Welsh Government categorisation and advised that Ysgol Maes Edwin was currently identified as category 4 (the lowest for educational standards).

The Chief Officer explained that the concerns and anxieties of pupils, parents, carers and staff were fully acknowledged, however, the Authority had a duty to provide high quality education which could be sustained, was affordable, and in the best interests of pupils and students for the future. The Chief Officer referred to the concerns which had been raised during the consultation and gave an assurance that the Authority would take all practicable steps to ease the transition for all pupils, especially vulnerable learners who had disabilities or Additional Learning Needs. He gave further assurance that the Authority had

fully considered all the concerns around school capacity, school admissions, and potential housing yield and confirmed the accuracy of the data contained in the consultation document which had in the main been provided by schools. He emphasised that Estyn held the view that the proposal was likely to at least maintain the current standards and quality of educational provision in the area. Estyn had also noted that the advantages of the proposal had been set out in the consultation document which included the efficient and effective use of resources, a reduction of unfilled pupil places, and reduction in travel to school for the majority of pupils should they choose their local school

Referring to the alternative suggestion to the proposal of a federation being formed, the Chief Officer advised that the Governing Body of Ysgol Maes Edwin had not, to date, been able to confirm a willing partnering school or schools to enable them to pursue a federation.

In summarising his comments the Chief Officer reiterated that the proposal was put forward on the basis of criteria laid down in the Council's School Modernisation Strategy relating to unfilled places across the primary school sector, diminishing resources, small schools, and Welsh Government categorisation. He emphasised that no willing partnering school or schools had put forward a proposal to form a federation with Ysgol Maes Edwin.

The Chairman thanked the Chief Officer for his presentation and invited Members to ask questions.

Councillor Paul Cunningham referred to the possibility of establishing a federation with another school or schools and asked whether enough time had been given to exploring this option. During discussion other Members expressed the same concern. Councillor Cunningham also commented on the capacity of a neighbouring school to accommodate pupils from Ysgol Maes Edwin if it closed. Members sought assurances that there was sufficient capacity at other local schools in the area and expressed the need to ensure that sibling and friendship groups remained together. A question was raised as to whether certain year groups within one neighbouring school were already full.

Mrs. Rebecca Stark commented on the need to consider the impact of a possible closure on parents and referred to the need for childcare provision. She asked if the arrangements for before and after school care at other schools in the area had been taken into consideration. She commented on the additional expense incurred for parents, particularly in the case of sibling groups, citing the cost of new school uniforms and transport as examples. She asked if consideration could be given to providing some financial assistance to parents experiencing difficulty.

The Chief Officer and Senior Manager, School Planning and Provision, responded to the comments and questions raised. Officers explained that it had been confirmed that no neighbouring school was willing to form a federation with Ysgol Maes Edwin. Officers confirmed that there was sufficient capacity in the local schools network to accommodate pupils from Ysgol Maes Edwin in the event of closure. Members were also informed that the position on capacity was being closely monitored. Concerning the question around year groups being full in one school, the Chief Officer informed of the options available to headteachers

to alter class structures at the beginning of each academic year. He commented on the “good” transitional arrangements and support provided by officers and gave an assurance that full co-operation would be in place to assist children and families throughout the process. The Chief Officer agreed to give consideration to the suggestion to financially assist parents with the cost of a new uniform as part of the planned transition arrangements.

Councillor David Healey urged the Authority to proceed with caution. He commended Officers on the provision which had been made for pupils with disabilities at Ysgol Maes Edwin, however, he said it was regrettable this would be lost if the school was to close and commented on the need and cost to ensure similar provision was replicated at other local schools.

Councillor Nancy Matthews referred to the benefits of pupils attending a small school and expressed concerns that these advantages would be lost if pupils transferred from Ysgol Maes Edwin to other local schools. The Chief Officer advised that it was Estyn’s view that the proposal was likely to at least maintain the present standards of education because of the quality of education provision within other local schools. The Chief Officer outlined the importance of supporting all children throughout the transition of school organisational change before, during, and after the process and referred to the provision of individual plans for pupils, especially for vulnerable groups of learners with Additional Learning Needs, in the event of school closure and transfer to other schools. He commented on the learning gained from previous school reorganisations concerning the support arrangements required.

Councillor Nigel Steele-Mortimer expressed a number of reasons as to why he held the view that Ysgol Maes Edwin should not be closed and referred to the excellent primary school network which currently existed across Flintshire. Councillor Chris Bithell commented on the level of austerity faced by the Authority and the current and future cuts to the level of funding received which had already resulted in maximum savings being achieved in other service areas. The Chief Officer and Senior Manager, School Planning and Provision, reported on the Authority’s statutory responsibility to manage the supply of school places. He referred to the financial impact on all other schools in the area in retaining surplus places as defined by the Welsh Government, Estyn, and the Welsh Audit Office as no more than 10% of the number of places across the system. Information on the consultation process, which was a legal requirement, was also provided to the Committee.

During discussion further concerns were raised by Members around demography and whether closing Ysgol Maes Edwin would have a negative impact on school places in the future. The impact that the Croes Atti Housing Development would have on pupil numbers in Flint was also raised and information sought around the arrangements concerning S106 funding. Members commented on the improvement in school pupil numbers since 2008.

Members expressed further concerns regarding the projected savings from school closure and how these would be re-invested. The Senior Manager, School Planning and Provision, outlined the projected savings and commented that funding for pupils would ‘follow’ the pupil in the event of school closure.

Responding to the further comments raised the Chief Officer referred to the community impact assessment which had been undertaken and explained that the loss of the School would impact on a small number of community activities taking place and the range of community facilities within the School. He also advised that the Authority had no plans for the school site should the school close and future usage of the site would be determined following confirmation that it was no longer required for educational purposes.

Councillor Nigel Steele-Mortimer proposed that the process to close Ysgol Maes Edwin be suspended to allow further opportunity for the option of federation to be considered. Following further discussion it was suggested that the process be suspended for a period of two months. The proposal was seconded by Councillor Nancy Matthews and when put to the vote was carried.

When asked, Officers confirmed that delaying a decision by two months to implement a proposal would significantly prolong the uncertainty for families and the wider community as implementation would no longer be possible for the commencement of the 2016-17 academic year.

The Chair thanked the Chief Officer and Senior Manager, School Planning and Provision, for their detailed responses to Members questions. He also thanked members of the public for their attendance and courtesy during the meeting.

**RESOLVED**

- (a) That the Committee recommend to Cabinet that the process be suspended for two months to allow the opportunity for federation to be reviewed; and
- (b) That the comments of the Committee be collated and presented to Cabinet at its meeting on the 19 January 2016.

**49. ATTENDANCE BY MEMBERS OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC**

There were five members of the public and one member of the press in attendance

(The meeting started at 10.00am and ended at 12.10pm)

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**Chairman**