

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 County Hall, Mold CH7 6NA on Wednesday, 6th January, 2016

PRESENT: Councillor Ian Roberts (Chairman)

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

CO-OPTED MEMBERS:

David Hytch, Rebecca Stark and Reverend John Thelwell

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillors Tony Sharps and Glyn Banks attended as observers

APOLOGIES:

Councillor Marion Bateman
Councillor Hilary Isherwood (Ward Member)
Bernard Stuart

CONTRIBUTORS:

Councillor Chris Bithell - Cabinet Member for Education, Chief Officer (Education and Youth), Senior Manager – School Planning & Provision and Senior Manager – Business Change and Support

IN ATTENDANCE:

Education and Youth Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator and Committee Officer

50. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

No declarations of interest were made.

51. SCHOOL MODERNISATION - SCHOOL STANDARDS AND REORGANISATION ACTION 2013 - YSGOL LLANFYNYDD

The Chief Officer (Education and Youth) introduced a report to inform the Committee of responses from the statutory consultation period for the proposal to close Ysgol Llanfynydd.

The Chief Officer provided detailed information on the process undertaken since the decision by Cabinet in June 2015 to enter into formal consultation on closure and other school organisation options for Ysgol Llanfynydd by September 2016. He commented on the important role of this Committee to consider the consultation document and the responses from stakeholders and to provide comments to Cabinet to allow a decision to be made on the next stage. Cabinet approved the formal consultation in line with criteria in the Council's School Modernisation Strategy which provided details of the unfilled places across the primary school portfolio, diminishing resource criteria and small school criteria. An extensive consultation exercise commenced on Wednesday 21 October and

ended on Wednesday 2 December 2015 and the views of children and young people had also been sought. The Chief Officer explained that it was no longer a requirement in Wales to hold meetings about school re-organisations but a number of events had been held to allow parents, teachers and pupils to put their views forward. The responses received focused on the following areas of concern:-

- Accuracy of data contained within the consultation document;
- Impact on pupils/transition/friendship groups;
- Education standards;
- Capacity of other schools in the area to accommodate pupils;
- Admissions to other schools should Ysgol Llanfynydd close;
- Transport and traffic

The next stage was for the views of this Committee to be considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 19th January 2016 and if the Cabinet decision was to proceed with its proposals, 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. After that period, Cabinet would be asked again to implement the school organisational change for Ysgol Llanfynydd or not. The Chief Officer reiterated that at its meeting in January 2016, Cabinet would not be making a decision on whether to implement the organisational change or not. He acknowledged that this was a lengthy process which would generate an amount of uncertainty for those involved. He paid tribute to the school community, staff and governors and added that the school was continuing to be a purposeful learning environment and was very much a working school. The Chief Officer explained that at September 2015 the school population had 34 pupils with unfilled places at 57.5% and for 44% of the pupils attending, Ysgol Llanfynydd was not their nearest school. The school population and capacity of Ysgol Llanfynydd was lower than 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.

The report detailed the concerns that had been raised during the consultation exercise including the views of the pupils who had indicated that they did not want their school to be closed. Concerns had also been expressed for their teachers, the transition to a new school and the loss of friendship groups and all of the consultation responses were included in appendix 2 to the report. On the issue raised about the accuracy of the data, a compliance statement in relation to the current school proposals was included at appendix 1. The Chief Officer confirmed that there was sufficient capacity at other schools to accommodate the pupils from Ysgol Llanfynydd and it had been stated that Ysgol Parc y Llan could accommodate all of the cohort from Ysgol Llanfynydd. He welcomed arrangements in place to the end of the summer term 2016 that the Headteacher from Ysgol Parc y Llan spent part of the week working at Ysgol Llanfynydd as Acting Headteacher. A suggestion of a federation had been made by a number of consultees but there had currently not been a submission of a business case for a federation and a willing school had not been identified with which to pursue a federation. It was reported that the Governing Body had also requested a reduction in its school funding formula allocation in order to demonstrate a lower operating cost per pupil. However, as the funding formula

must be consistently applied across all schools with any changes to the formula being consulted on and agreed, a reduction in funding could not be applied by the Authority for an individual school. The Chief Officer spoke of a managed transition that would be in place for all pupils from Ysgol Llanfynydd, especially for vulnerable learners such as those with additional learning needs. The Council would work alongside pupils, their parents and the relevant school to make appropriate transition arrangements for pupils to familiarise themselves with their new environments, subject to parental preference.

Councillor David Healey sought clarification on the cost of £80,000 reported for the repair of the roof at the school and expressed significant concern about the comments that the school had been overfunded by £1,000 per pupil, particularly as a secondary school that pupils from Ysgol Llanfynydd could attend was one of the lowest funded secondary schools. He asked if Flintshire County Council's Schools Budget Forum could review the funding formula for schools to ensure fairness for all schools. Councillor Healey commented that it was important that pupils received education of an equal standard and he queried whether the education provision could cope at all years. He asked if assurance could be given that families with more than one child in Ysgol Llanfynydd would be placed in one school to prevent additional journeys for parents to different schools to drop off and pick up their children, if Ysgol Llanfynydd was closed. He also asked about the funding of pupils who were educated in Flintshire but lived elsewhere. Councillor Healey also expressed concern about the issue of additional traffic at Abermorddu school if some pupils from Ysgol Llanfynydd were to attend and spoke of a recent conversation with a parent about a child nearly being knocked over by a car outside Abermorddu school. He said that he had raised the issue and that he had been advised that Streetscene were considering implementing changes in the area but Councillor Healey felt that this would not affect the volume of traffic and that dangers would increase if a significant number of additional pupils were to attend Abermorddu school. He also commented on the impact on the community if Ysgol Llanfynydd were to close and spoke of the withdrawal of bus subsidies and the closure of a nearby Household Recycling Centre, both of which had affected those in the community.

In response to the comments made, the Chief Officer advised that if pupils were educated in a Flintshire school, this would be funded by Flintshire County Council and that no funding was received from the authority in which the pupils lived. On education standards, he said that it was the opinion of Estyn that the proposals would at least maintain the quality of learning and there were clearly close links with Ysgol Parc y Llan where the governors had suggested that all of the pupils from Ysgol Llanfynydd could be accommodated at the school through a managed transition. He added that there were also other schools that had some vacancies. He reminded the Committee that parental choice would need to be considered and that if Ysgol Llanfynydd did close then all practicable steps would be taken to ease the transition for all learners. The Chief Officer commented on the unique issue of overfunding for Ysgol Llanfynydd and advised the Committee that the Schools Budget Forum monitored the funding formula work and that a suggestion could be put forward that monies for this individual school be reviewed.

Councillor Chris Bithell said that the funding for schools had been reviewed in 2013/14 and the amount that Ysgol Llanfynydd received had not

been objected to at that time. He added that discussions had taken place on a Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) level about the national funding formula. The formula had been reviewed a number of years ago by Welsh Government (WG) and had resulted in a reduction for Flintshire County Council as the funding was greater for authorities with higher levels of deprivation. On the issue of transport costs, he explained that the Council for the area in which the child lived would be responsible for funding school travel costs if Ysgol Llanfynydd was to close.

On the issue of the cost of £80,000 for the repair to the school roof, the Chief Officer explained that a consistent approach was applied across all schools for independent contractors to carry out condition surveys. He explained that because of the age of the school building, the materials required for the repairs were expensive. The Senior Manager – School Planning & Provision confirmed that the survey work for repairs and maintenance was carried out on a five year cycle and allowed the local authority to prioritise its maintenance programme. If the school remained open, a tendering process would commence when the work was required and the costs would increase each year based on inflation. Councillor Healey queried whether £80,000 would be the cost faced by a third party if the school building was taken over under a Community Asset Transfer if the school was to close. The Chief Officer confirmed that the Council would not determine the future use of a school until after it had become vacant. He added that discussions would need to take place, if the building was transferred, on funding for any necessary repairs and maintenance.

Councillor Nigel Steele-Mortimer expressed his significant concern about the reviews being undertaken on primary schools in the County. He felt that the documents were a 'justification report' rather than a consultation report to justify closure of the school. He spoke of the comments of Estyn that the education standards should at least be maintained and said that retention should be encouraged as the school numbers had seen very little reduction in recent years. Councillor Steele-Mortimer welcomed the suggestion of a federation but expressed concern that the Headteacher from Ysgol Parc y Llan would only be Acting Head at Ysgol Llanfynydd until the end of the summer term 2016. He felt that a federation could be achieved and indicated that he would later move a recommendation to allow the school more time to explore the option of a federation.

In response, the Chief Officer reiterated his earlier comments that there were no partner schools willing to consider a federation with Ysgol Llanfynydd and that the Acting Headteacher would only be in place until the end of the summer term 2016. He referred to appendix I where comments referred to the awareness of the school modernisation process and the need to 'future proof' education provision for pupils in the county. The pupils from Ysgol Llanfynydd would be welcomed at Ysgol Parc y Llan and the school was able to accommodate the complete cohort if necessary. The Chief Officer added that there would be no disadvantage to pupils on the issue of transport as consideration would be given to more generous arrangements than were specified in the policy. No schools had submitted a business case for a federation with Ysgol Llanfynydd and therefore consideration needed to be given that no schools were willing to work with Ysgol Llanfynydd.

Councillor Bithell referred to the difficult decisions being faced by many Councils because of budget cuts which had been on a scale not experienced before. He said that it was no longer possible to subsidise schools and he commented on other services which were being cut such as libraries and household recycling centres.

Following a query from Councillor Steele-Mortimer about the savings that would be made from closing the school, the Senior Manager – School Planning & Provision explained that estimated total net savings of £186,327 could be achieved based on savings on the formula funding, backlog maintenance and catering less the requirement for transport costs.

Councillor Nancy Matthews asked whether alternative schools offered after school clubs which were currently available at Ysgol Llanfynydd and queried whether parent governors could decide if the school closed or not. She also asked whether a federation would benefit both schools and what the differences were between a shared head and a full federation.

In response, the Chief Officer indicated that he had met with both governing bodies to obtain their views and it had been indicated that the federation in Wales was quite a restrictive model which required joint governance and operating arrangements between both schools. In all documents Ysgol Parc y Llan had not been willing to be part of a federation proposal but had felt that a more sustainable option would be for the current cohort at Ysgol Llanfynydd to move to Ysgol Parc y Llan rather than collaborate on two sites. The Senior Manager – School Planning & Provision explained that Ysgol Llanfynydd did not offer 'wraparound' care but a group had been established in September 2015 to provide before and after school care for the children; he spoke of other schools that also offered such provision.

Mrs. Rebecca Stark commented on the potential transfer of the children to another school, particularly those with additional needs, and sought clarification on how this would be achieved to ensure the children were protected and supported appropriately. She felt that the Committee should monitor the effect of the impact on the children over time to identify whether any additional support was required. The Chief Officer welcomed the suggestion and agreed that it was appropriate for a report to be submitted to the Committee following the possible closure of a school to ensure that learning requirements were being achieved. He also spoke of the importance of providing support to all pupils during the transition and added that funding for pupils with additional learning needs would follow the pupils to their new schools. This could mean that the member of staff would also be transferred to the new school to practically support the transition.

Mr. David Hytch was saddened by the loss of schools on communities but he understood that difficult decisions had to be made because of austerity cuts. He queried whether the school would still be under review if the costings for the roof were not a consideration. In referring to educational standards, he suggested that some pupils progressed well in smaller schools but there were also some who would be disadvantaged which was a concern. The Chief Officer responded that it was important to recognise that the alternative schools proposed were small village schools and that he had a high level of confidence that they were good schools for the pupils to transfer to.

Councillor Healey sought responses on his earlier questions about increased traffic at Abermorddu school and siblings being able to attend the same school.

The Senior Manager – School Planning & Provision felt that the school closure could result in less traffic if the cohort of pupils moved to Ysgol Parc y Llan as transport would be provided and added that the issue of transport because of parental preference would be a consideration for the authority in which the children lived. Modelling work on transport issues had been undertaken on the basis of pupils transferring to Ysgol Parc y Llan. The Chief Officer indicated that the issues raised about parking problems at Abermorddu school would be considered.

Councillor Andy Dunbobbin raised significant concern about the proposal to close Ysgol Llanfynydd and felt that more could have been done to save the school.

Mrs. Stark sought clarification on whether transport would be provided for the children at Ysgol Llanfynydd for the term of their education at a new school. She asked that if the transport policy was reviewed in the future that it ensured protection for children for the period of their education. The Chief Officer confirmed that this was the case for the current cohort at Ysgol Llanfynydd.

As there were no proposals from the Committee following a request from the Chairman, the Education and Youth Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator indicated that the comments from the Committee could be submitted to Cabinet to inform their consideration of the proposals. This was moved and duly seconded and on being put to the vote was carried.

RESOLVED:

That the comments made by the Committee be submitted to Cabinet to inform their consideration of the proposals.

52. SCHOOL GOVERNOR VACANCIES

The Senior Manager - Business Change and Support provided a verbal update for the Committee on School Governor Vacancies. She explained that the request for further information had been made by Councillor Nancy Matthews and Mrs. Rebecca Stark.

The Local Education Authority (LEA) had a total of 440 LEA Governor representatives on school governing bodies and over the four year term, a number of vacancies would arise. There were currently eight vacancies that had not been filled for longer than two months and seven were due next term, which was a small number compared to the number of LEA representatives. The Senior Manager explained the process for appointing LEA Governors and advised that any appointments were signed off by the Cabinet Member for Education and the Chief Officer (Education and Youth) under delegated powers. Work was undertaken with the Clerk when vacancies occurred and in the short

term, she would continue to work with Ward Members and intelligence from the Head Teachers to try and fill the outstanding vacancies. In the longer term, the Senior Manager had considered whether representatives from the voluntary sector could become governors and she had also considered other alternatives which were still in line with the Council's policies. Details of the process undertaken by Denbighshire County Council in appointing LEA Governor representatives were also provided. Welsh Government was considering a review of the School Governor legislation framework to streamline the regulations and also the current stakeholder model. The Senior Manager explained that this could result in a smaller number of LEA representatives in future. She spoke of the training that needed to be undertaken by School Governors and added that it was a credit to the Governing Bodies that the number of vacancies was low.

Councillor Chris Bithell welcomed the small number of LEA Governor vacancies and suggested that the role was more onerous than it had been in the past. He asked Members to advise him if they were aware of possible LEA Governor representatives that they could not accommodate on their Governing Bodies but who would be prepared to travel as this may be a way of filling some of the outstanding vacancies. The Chairman referred to the difficulty in identifying LEA Governor representatives who were not connected to the school that he was a Governor at. In response, the Senior Manager spoke of the importance of carrying out a School Governing Bodies needs analysis to identify specific areas that appointments could be considered from.

Mrs. Rebecca Stark thanked the Senior Manager for the update and commented on problems in the past because of the long process of appointing LEA Governor representatives. The Senior Manager confirmed that the panel which had previously been in place to make the appointments was no longer used. Mrs. Stark welcomed the progress that had been made for filling vacancies. She sought further information on the total number of vacancies, not just LEA Governor representatives, on School Governing Bodies, and the Senior Manager confirmed that she would contact schools to obtain the information.

Councillor Paul Cunningham spoke of the reluctance of people to take on the demanding role of being a School Governor and the requirement to undertake mandatory training. He felt that the role could be onerous but that it was also satisfying.

Mr. David Hytch commented on the inevitability of vacancies during the four year cycle. In response to further comments from Mr. Hytch and finding suitable representatives for the School Governing Bodies, the Senior Manager advised that the Cabinet Member and Chief Officer could reject representatives under their delegated powers if they felt that the person was unsuitable. The Chief Officer added that there would need to be strong reasons for rejecting applicants.

Councillor Nancy Matthews spoke of the work that had been undertaken by the Alun School Mold Governors on the skills that they felt were required on the Governing Body. She felt that the process to identify individuals with those skills had been smooth and suggested that sometimes people just needed to be asked if they were willing to be a School Governing Body representative. The

Senior Manager suggested that consideration was being given to holding an Open Day to raise awareness of the role of School Governing Bodies.

RESOLVED:

That the verbal update be received.

53. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Education and Youth Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator introduced the report to consider the Forward Work Programme for the Committee.

The Facilitator advised that a special meeting of the Committee was to be held on 5th February 2016 to consider the School Organisational Change for Ysgol Mornant Gwespyr Picton.

A joint meeting of this Committee and Social & Health Care Overview & Scrutiny had been held in previous years and the Facilitator suggested that the meeting scheduled for 24th March 2016 be used for a joint meeting. This would mean that the report on the Welsh Education Strategic Plan would be submitted to the 25th February 2016 meeting and the Quarter 3 – Improvement Plan Monitoring Reports would be considered at the 28th April 2016 meeting.

RESOLVED:

That the Forward Work Programme, as amended at the meeting, be approved.

54. MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There were five members of the public and two members of the press in attendance.

(The meeting started at 2.00 pm and ended at 3.49pm)

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Chairman