

EDUCATION, YOUTH & CULTURE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
14 JULY 2022

Minutes of the virtual meeting of the Education, Youth & Culture Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held on Thursday 14 July 2022.

PRESENT: Councillor Teresa Carberry (Chair)

Councillors: Bill Crease, Paul Cunningham, Gladys Healey, Andy Hughes, Gina Maddison, Dave Mackie, Ryan McKeown, Andrew Parkhurst, Carolyn Preece, David Richardson and Jason Shallcross

CO-OPTED MEMBER: Lynn Bartlett

APOLOGIES: Mrs Wendy White

CONTRIBUTORS:

Councillor Ian Roberts, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Education, Welsh Language, Culture and Leisure, Chief Officer (Education & Youth) Democratic Services Manager (for minute number 9) and Senior Learning Advisor (Engagement) (for minute number 10)

IN ATTENDANCE:

Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator and Democratic Services Officers

6. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

There were no declarations of interest.

7. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 June 2022 were received.

The minutes were moved as a correct record by Councillor David Mackie and seconded by Councillor Gladys Healey

RESOLVED:

That the minutes be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

8. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME AND ACTION TRACKING

The Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator presented the draft Forward Work Programme clarifying that the document had been updated following the briefing session at the last meeting and was attached at Appendix 2. An overview of the items listed for the September, October, December and February 2023 was provided. Moving on to the Action Tracking report she confirmed that all actions arising from the last meeting, as shown at Appendix 2 of the report, had been completed.

In response to questions from Councillor Dave Mackie on the strength of the internet in schools and the provision of school meals, the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) confirmed they were aware of the internet issues which were because of the PSBA National Infrastructure Programme. She confirmed that the Council's IT department were working to ensure these issues were resolved saying these were not exclusive to Flintshire. Referring to the school meals question the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) provided information on the changes to the business model used by NEWydd and the central production kitchen based at County Hall. She agreed to ask the Managing Director of NEWydd to prepare a report outlining the recruitment challenges they were facing, the changes to the provision of school meals and include information on the universal roll out for school meals for infant aged school children. Referring to the Forward Work Programme the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) asked if the School Balances Report could be included for the September meeting.

In response to a question from Councillor Gladys Healey on vapes in schools the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) referred to discussions held at recent meetings of the Federation of Head Teachers and Education Consultative Committee. Work was being undertaken to provide good policy guidance to support teachers to manage the situation in schools as the health implications for children were not fully understood. Trading Standards were also involved as sales of vaping products to children under 18 was against the law and she outlined the procedures being put in place for schools to contact Trading Standards if they had concerns or local intelligence. This was an important issue and she suggested that this be included in the spring as part of the Healthy Schools initiative. She reassured Members that this was being monitored closely.

Councillor Andrew Parkhurst asked if vaping was allowed on school premises to which the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) confirmed it was not. This would be addressed within the school policies and was being managed at present, but it was about understanding the legislation on what was acceptable on school premises.

The recommendations, as outlined within the report, were moved by Councillor Paul Cunningham and seconded by Councillor Gladys Healey.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Forward Work Programme be noted;
- (b) That the Facilitator, in consultation with the Chair of the Committee, be authorised to vary the Forward Work Programme between meetings, as the need arises; and
- (c) That the progress made in completing the outstanding actions be noted.

9. TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE COMMITTEE

In presenting the report the Democratic Services Manager explained that in October last year the Chief Officer structure was changed and that the Terms of Reference required amendment to align with those changes. He referred members

to Appendix 2 on page 26 of the report which highlighted the changes in red for the committee's approval.

The recommendation, as outlined within the report, was moved by Mrs Lynn Bartlett and seconded by Councillor Gladys Healey.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee support the proposed amendments to its terms of reference as set out in Appendix 2.

10. SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AND EXCLUSIONS

In presenting the report the Senior Learning Advisor (Engagement) provided detailed information on the levels of attendance and exclusions across the county which were the main reasons for pupil absence from September 2020 to Summer 2021. Information on the trends for school attendance, levels of fixed term and permanent exclusions was given but the national picture from Welsh Government (WG) was suspended during this period, so the information presented was gathered from our local schools and SIMS data. He referred Members to Appendix 1 and explained that Welsh Government (WG) had provided specific Covid-19 absence marks for schools to use but many of the absences were recorded with the (i) mark. The work of the Educational Welfare Service (EWS) and other teams had changed during, and following, the Covid-19 pandemic and he outlined what processes and support were provided to vulnerable learners to maintain contact, ensure they were in a safe environment to enable them to engage with education.

The Senior Learning Advisor then provided information on the Fixed Term and Permanent Exclusions which had been increasing in recent years and he outlined the reasons for these exclusions. Detailed information was provided on how his team had changed their approach to proactively look for hotspots and engage with these pupils to hopefully turn the situation around and enable them to return to education.

Following several questions from Members the Senior Learning Advisor provided detailed information on the exclusion process, patterns of behaviour, marks used by Head Teachers and responsibility for logging absences. The pandemic had impacted pupils attendance at school with covid, mental health and other issues a concern. He outlined the proactive way that engagement with these pupils was taking place to understand the reasons for absence and provide support to pupils and families to enable them to return to school.

The Senior Learning Advisor then referred to unauthorized absences and provided information on the Welsh Government (WG) thresholds and levels within Flintshire schools. It was anticipated that the situation would improve with the new approaches from the Education Welfare Service (EWS) that would be in place from September. The Chief Officer (Education & Youth) confirmed that schools wanted to keep unauthorized absences to a minimum from a safeguarding perspective and outlined the systems in place in schools such as the Attendance Policy which required follow up from the school from the first day of absence if no contact had

been received from the parents. Head Teachers could escalate unauthorised absences to the EWS so that fixed penalty notices could be issued. The Senior Learning Advisor reported on the monthly meetings held with the Education Other than at School team (EOTAS) and gave an overview of the Early Intervention Strategy to help, assist and support pupils and families to enable better outcomes.

Councillor Andrew Parkhurst asked if there was a target for the whole of Flintshire not individual schools for unauthorised absences. In response the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) commented their aspiration would be zero but recognized that there would be absences, but it was important that schools understood the reasons why pupils were absent and that they were safe.

In response to questions from Councillor Carolyn Preece, the Senior Learning Advisor advised that Welsh Government (WG) had not removed the covid marker yet but reported on informal networks across the region where information could be shared. The situation in Flintshire was not uncommon with other authorities. Schools were using the same generic systems when logging attendance information which included links to all agencies such as the Schools Inclusion Service and Youth Justice Service. It was explained that the authority had a duty of care to provide automatic support and education to those excluded learners. For those permanent exclusions engagement would be made with the families to understand the process which could enable them to return to school with parents having other options such as choosing another school for their child. The EWS had recruiting staff to provide that liaison between elective home educated children and to ensure the service was more responsive. with the service becoming more responsive. An overview of the work undertaken by the Strategic Group to understand and support pupils with more than 3 exclusions was provided.

The Leader and Cabinet Member for Education, Welsh Language, Culture and Leisure, commented that previously the blanket target figure for attendance across all schools was 95% with some schools achieving this and other schools struggling to achieve it was not constructive. There were a range of other strategies including managed moves used when a fresh start could be suitable for pupils. It was very easy to set targets, but these did not to recognize the challenges met in schools to achieve that target. The Senior Learning Advisor said welfare and working with families was always a starting point to target support in the most effective way. With data and information more effectively underpinning the work of the EWS with more targeted interventions it was hoped that there are more positive outcomes for learners, particularly in improved attendance and reduced exclusions.

In response to the comments made by Councillor Dave Mackie, the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) said just setting an arbitrary target would not drive improvements in every school. She provided reassurance to Members that schools had robust processes, policies, and systems in place with the Senior Learner Advisor and his team providing that extra scrutiny and support to schools. If schools were unable to secure improvements with a family the Senior Learning Advisor and his team would step in to provide those interventions and support. She outlined the changes within the team to support schools to exercise their statutory functions and that next year it would be possible to demonstrate the impacts of those actions.

In response to a question from Councillor Gina Maddison on whether this was an emerging trend prior to Covid, the Senior Learning Advisor commented that Covid had been exceptional with the impacts felt across the country. From a welfare perspective, when trying to understand what children had experienced, as regards isolation, working from home, missing friends, and routine this provided some of the reasons why they were reluctant to go to school. The Head Teacher would have the evidence in line with the graduated response to allow them to authorize the absence or not and enable them to enable engagement with various options available to support that pupil. The Chief Officer (Education & Youth) reported that prior to Covid there had been a declining attendance trend at secondary school level which was referenced in the 2019 Estyn Report. Cases of anxiety and mental health issues were being reported by pupils then, resulting in some not wanting to attend schools and the pandemic had exacerbated that.

In response to a question from Councillor Andy Hughes on the first batch of fixed penalty notices, the Senior Learning Advisor confirmed that the application of a fixed penalty notice was at the discretion of the Head Teacher under the Attendance Policy. He outlined how his team administered and delivered them with every case dealt with on its individual merits.

The recommendations, as outlined within the report, were moved Councillor Gina Maddison and seconded by Councillor Carolyn Preece.

RESOLVED:

- (a) Members accepted the attendance and exclusion data for Flintshire schools and the actions undertaken by officers to support increased engagement and the safety and wellbeing of our children and young people; and
- (b) Members recognised that the data provided had been impacted by COVID19 lockdown and school closures.

11. SOCIAL MEDIA AND INTERNET SAFETY

In presenting the report the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) commented that the report was brought to committee annually and she highlighted some of the headlines. There were significant challenges for pupils and schools as regards to online safety and it was important that they kept themselves safe online.

She referred Members to key points in the report which provided advice and guidance to schools on Social Media and Internet Safety. Information on the Hwb site which promoted the 360-degree Safe Cymru Tool for schools, was something the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) wanted all schools to use. Reference to the Safer Internet Day was provided, with training provided by the Regional Improvement Service (GwE) and all schools having access to the online bullying form and explanations on how it should be reported. The IT web filtering systems were explained, and she also provided information on the Schools Health Research Network (SHRN) and the "Be Kind Online Pledge".

The Chief Officer (Education & Youth) sought members thoughts on whether the Social Media and Internet Safety report should continue to be part of the Annual Safeguarding in Education report or be a separate report presented to this committee or indeed presented to the joint Education Youth & Culture and Social & Health Care Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

A discussion followed with some Members commenting that it should go to the joint meeting with the Social & Health Care Overview & Scrutiny Committee to enable wider debate.

Members were also requested to email questions to the Healthy Schools Practitioner and the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) and that all questions and responses would be circulated to members of the committee.

Councillor Carolyn Preece had concerns with the second recommendation saying that this could get lost in the main report and lose focus. The Chief Officer (Education & Youth) provided re-assurance that there would be a specific section for this within the Safeguarding in Education report.

The first recommendation, as outlined within the report, was moved by Councillor Paul Cunningham and seconded by Councillor Gladys Healey

The second recommendation, as outlined within the report, was moved by Councillor Paul Cunningham and seconded by Councillor Carolyn Preece.

RESOLVED:

- (a) Members confirmed they had received an appropriate level of assurance regarding the support and monitoring of schools with regard to social media and internet safety.
- (b) Members agreed for future reporting that Online Safety was incorporated within the annual Safeguarding in Education report and presented to the Joint Education Youth & Culture and Social & Health Care Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

12. END OF YEAR PERFORMANCE MONITORING REPORT

The report was presented by the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) and included a summary of the outturn progress of the Council Plan priorities, which were relevant to the Education & Youth portfolio for 2021/22. This was a very positive report and demonstrated progress made against those priorities. She referred members to page 69 which included the range of targets which were mostly green with a small number which were amber.

In response to a question on targets from Councillor Dave Mackie, the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) clarified that these were for areas around attendance and exclusions and explained that targets were not collected as Welsh Government (WG) had suspended performance measures because of the pandemic. She confirmed that the authority's localised data on attendance and exclusions was

recorded as unverified data and included in the report and agreed to take Councillor Mackie's comments back to the team. WG did not require the authority to produce targets, but she said these were being set for the current year and that the summary report would provide that context.

Carolyn Preece thanked the team for a very thorough and excellent report and commended the team, schools and staff for the work undertaken throughout and coming out of the pandemic. The Chief Officer (Education & Youth) agreed to pass on her thanks to team and schools.

Councillor Paul Cunningham commented that having this information enabled good scrutiny and he looked forward to the reports providing better information as we recover from the pandemic. The Chief Officer (Education & Youth) welcomed scrutiny by committee members as it was a very important process. She reiterated if any member had any concerns that they could contact her at any time to discuss them.

Councillor Gladys Healey agreed with the comments made by Councillor Mackie and had real concerns regarding housing and poverty. In the current climate with bills increasing this would exacerbate issues of poverty although she understood that budgets were tight. She asked if the Leader could lobby Welsh Government (WG) for more money to provide support for people in poverty.

In response the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) and referred to the new Council Plan on the committee's Forward Work Programme saying that every portfolio of the Council was contributing to Poverty. She reported on the Child Poverty initiative, Well Fed initiative and additional discretionary payments endorsed recently by Cabinet. This was a corporate responsibility to address the impacts on children and families but some of the issues were out of the Council's control.

The Leader and Cabinet Member for Education, Welsh Language, Culture and Leisure, re-assured members that he was constantly lobbying WG on this. He agreed with the comments made by the Chief Officer on the corporate response and praised the schools for the significant work they were doing with initiatives such as for school uniforms and breakfast clubs enabling children to get a good breakfast which had increased attendance levels. He outlined the corporate initiatives across the council and commented on the excellent schemes provided by the voluntary sector and said that all of this would ensure the best possible outcomes.

The recommendations, as outlined within the report, were moved by Councillor Dave Mackie and seconded by Mrs Lynn Bartlett.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the committee supported the levels of progress and had confidence in the achievement of priorities within the 2021/22 Council Plan;
- (b) That the committee supported the overall performance against 2021/22 Council Plan performance indicators; and

- (c) That the committee was assured by explanations given for those areas of underperformance.

13. MEMBERS OF THE PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There were no members of the press in attendance.

(The meeting started at 2.00 pm and ended at 15.49 pm)

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Chair