

EDUCATION, YOUTH & CULTURE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

10 OCTOBER 2022

Minutes of the hybrid meeting of the Education, Youth & Culture Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held on Monday 10 October 2022.

PRESENT: Councillor Teresa Carberry (Chair)

Councillors: Bill Crease, Paul Cunningham, Gladys Healey, Gina Maddison, Dave Mackie, Ryan McKeown, Andrew Parkhurst, David Richardson and Arnold Woolley.

APOLOGIES: Lynn Bartlett, Jeanette Rock and Mrs Wendy White

SUBSTITUTIONS: Councillors: Mel Buckley (for Councillor Carolyn Preece) and Rob Davies (for Councillor Jason Shallcross)

CONTRIBUTORS:

Councillor Ian Roberts, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Education, Welsh Language, Culture and Leisure, Chief Officer (Education & Youth)
Senior Manager for School Improvement and Martyn Froggett and David Edwards and Phil McTague (GwE) (for minute number 23)
Strategic Finance Manager – Schools (for minute number 25)
Senior Manager (Business Change & Support)

IN ATTENDANCE:

Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator, Democratic Services Manager and Democratic Services Officer

20. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

There were no declarations of interest.

21. MINUTES

The minutes of the joint meeting with the Social & Health Care Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on the 30 June were received.

Councillor Andrew Parkhurst referred to page 14 and asked if the Senior Manager (Inclusion and Progression) had spoken to colleagues in the Educational Psychology Services regarding children with Special Educational Needs. As the Senior Manager (Inclusion and Progression) was unable to attend this meeting the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) agreed to speak with her and report back to Councillor Parkhurst following the meeting.

The minutes of the meetings held on the 14 July and 29 July 2022 were both received.

The three sets of minutes were moved as a correct record by Councillor Bill Crease and seconded by Councillor Gladys Healey.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meetings held on 30 June, 14 July and 29 July 2022 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

22. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME AND ACTION TRACKING

The Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator presented the current Forward Work Programme which had been amended following the last meeting and incorporated suggestions made by members of the Committee. Referring to the Action Tracking Report the Facilitator confirmed that all actions were now completed. There was one ongoing item from Adviser for Health, Well-being and Safeguarding who had confirmed she was chasing responses and would circulate these once received.

In response to a question from Councillor Bill Crease on how the internet access of staff at schools was managed and monitored, the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) confirmed that all schools had acceptable use policies, which staff had to sign, and that the internet and firewall were monitored at County Hall. A report on social media and internet safety was brought to Committee annually and was included on the Forward Work Programme. She agreed to speak with the Adviser for Health, Well-being and Safeguarding and provide a response for Councillor Crease following the meeting.

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

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.

23. REGIONAL SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS AND IMPROVEMENT SERVICE (GWE) ANNUAL REPORT 2021-2022

The Chair thanked GwE for the support they had provided during the Pandemic to school leaders and for their continuing support to Flintshire schools with the roll out of the Curriculum for Wales (CfW).

Mr Martyn Froggett (Supporting Improvement Adviser) explained a presentation had been prepared which was in addition to the reports attached to the agenda. He introduced Phil McTague (Secondary Core Lead) and David Edwards (Primary Core Lead) who would also be assisting with the presentation which focussed on work currently undertaken in schools, information on Welsh Government (WG) policies and pandemic recovery support for schools.

The Primary Core Lead gave a presentation which covered the following areas: -

- The three main priorities for GwE:-
 - Implementing Curriculum for Wales
 - Ensuring robust self-evaluation processes
 - Estyn Inspections
- Primary – Curriculum for Wales
 - identified the unique factors of their school and how these contribute to the four purposes
 - reviewed their vision, values and behaviours to support the curriculum
 - been mindful of the key considerations e.g. statutory and mandatory elements
 - reviewed curriculum design models
 - considered the role of progression and pedagogy in their curriculum
 - begun to design, plan, trial and evaluate new topics.
- Primary – Self-evaluation & quality assurance
- Primary – Estyn Inspections

The Secondary Core Lead continued with the presentation which covered the following areas: -

- Secondary – Support for Curriculum for Wales
 - All Flintshire schools have made extensive use of the regional support programme
 - Engagement in regional /local planning groups is good.
 - Schools have taken up the offer of specific for bespoke input from the GwE team on teaching and learning
 - There is increasing collaborative work through clusters and through alliances
 - ‘Six Steps’ reports (focussing on the Education Minister’s requirements of progress toward CfW) were undertaken with all schools in the summer term following discussions between schools and their SIAs

- Secondary – self-evaluation & quality assurance
- Preparation for inspection in secondary schools under the new Estyn Framework

In response to a question from Councillor Andrew Parkhurst on the robustness and objective measurement of Estyn Inspections, Mr Martyn Froggett (Supporting Improvement Adviser) said previously with Estyn focussing on exam results the work that pupils had achieved in the classroom had taken second place. Now Estyn's base of evidence was the books the pupils were currently working from and the lessons that they were having which were moderated and he explained how this would work in schools. GwE were supporting schools but said that it would take some time for the shared understanding of progression to be established.

Mr Phil McTague (Secondary Core Lead) explained that it was the in-school variant which was more significant, and he explained what GwE were focussing on. He provided information on the question level analysis which would enable training strategies to be provided to bring about improvements. The data for the in-school variants, the question level analysis and classroom observations would drive progression and standards. He felt that this ensured a more research informed accountability in schools rather than comparing one school to another as regards progress especially as data is one element of a school's performance.

Councillor Dave Mackie outlined his view on the role of Members at Scrutiny Committees and the need to ask questions relating to reports presented to the Committee. He raised concern that the presentation provided did not relate to the report but focussed on priorities for the future. He raised a number of questions on the data provided in the report and questioned the need for additional explanations to the data.

In response the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) said that a significant amount of documentation had been appended to the report which reflected on the work of the School Improvement Service over the last 12 months. The presentation was provided to reassure members of the current position of the service in the new academic year and the focus moving forward building on the priorities for improvement reflected in the reports. Evaluation had been undertaken at GwE level, Local Authority level, through Management Board and the Joint Committee to identify the direction of the service going forward. GwE was a joint service commissioned with all six local authorities in Wales and she understood Councillor Mackie's comments around value for money and said that combined with the next report on Self Evaluation Members should be assured that the Council was getting value for money. The progress and strong performance within schools was being seen in the standards achieved and was an indication of the extensive support provided by GwE through the school improvement advisers to schools and head teachers and the significant level of engagement with the professional learning provided by GwE to Flintshire schools.

The Chief Officer agreed to feedback Councillor Mackie's comments regarding comparison data to Management Board but added the service had to change its model as the situation in schools had changed with statutory education suspended. Inspections ceased with WG making several changes with the focus on safety and well being of staff and pupils. During the last year the focus had been on education but within the constraints of the Pandemic and she outlined the implications. The reports tried to outline the core purposes and situations in schools, but the focus was now getting back to the school improvement function, quality self-evaluation and the quality of teaching learners in the classroom. Flintshire schools were responding well to those quality interventions which ensured learners achieved their best possible outcomes. Where there were concerns, she outlined the detailed mechanisms in place to provide extra interventions to ensure they were effective.

Councillor Mackie replied that the role of Members was to be a critical friend and provide challenge. He felt that the critical element was that GwE had not provided the objectives they were looking for, the path they would take to achieve those objectives and obtain the improvement identified. He felt that this information should be provided in order for Members to undertake appropriate scrutiny.

Councillor Bill Crease said that moving away from exam centric performance evaluation to pupil centric performance appealed greatly to him but had its own challenges to evaluate progress. He agreed with the comments made by Councillor Mackie and said that being able to evaluate and attempt valuable scrutiny of the reports was difficult and said that the data needed to be more focused.

The Chair said that she saw GwE as a supportive critical friend with high expectations for our schools. She understood that the Curriculum for Wales considered partnership working between schools, WG, GwE and interested service providers. She also understood that WG were working to provide resources to support this Curriculum and valued the presentation. The report provided information on the work which had preceded but the presentation outlined what would be happening moving forward. GwE provided valuable support to schools and that the end point of a child's education was not going to be measured on their exam results and that there were so many other things within schools which had to be observed.

The Senior Manager for School Improvement reported that the landscape was changing from focused accountability to looking at the whole provision of education and that her role was to scrutinise GwE and that the objectives within the report were for the whole system alongside the other 5 Local Authorities and to drive standards nationally across Wales. The detailed operational activity was on a school-to-school basis, and she welcomed the support of GwE to enable the research for each individual school to ensure inconsistencies were tackled, standards were raised, and best practice was shared across all areas. Talking to learners, looking at evidence, skills progression and well being would raise standards across Wales for all learners. The core vision, purpose, accountability framework, support for children with additional learning needs would drive this forward.

The Chief Officer acknowledged that there had been a significant workload for Members due to the number and scale of the reports as GwE were keen to share the

level of work and transformation following the pandemic together with information on the implementation of the new Curriculum. She provided information on the Management Board and GwE Joint Committee saying these reports had been presented to these committees. The feedback on the reports as regards size, scale and focus would be taken back.

The Facilitator confirmed that she had made note of the questions made by Councillor Mackie and would be taking those up as actions following the meeting.

Councillor Mackie referred to the Chief Officer's comments and said if more focussed reports could be included in the recommendations and if more information was required then this could be dealt with as a workshop which would enable officers to brief members.

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

RESOLVED:

That the Committee accept the Annual Report from GwE, whilst noting the positive impact of the regional service in supporting Flintshire schools throughout the pandemic, maintaining the focus on effective and successful schools and supporting schools in their preparations for the implementation of the new Curriculum for Wales.

24. SELF-EVALUATION REPORT EDUCATION SERVICES 2021-22

In presenting the report the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) provided an overview of the April 2021 to March 2022 Self Evaluation. She stated that with the suspension of Estyn inspections, the portfolio's previous two evaluation reports had not followed the Local Government Education Services (LGES) Inspection framework. The portfolio had now reverted to that structure as Inspections had resumed, the Authority's last inspection took place in 2019, and Estyn were proposing to complete this cycle by the summer of 2024. Information was provided on the focus of self-evaluation which identified strengths, areas to improve and how these improvements were made. The Estyn area framework together with the four recommendations made were included in the report and the portfolio continued to make progress against these recommendations despite the challenges of the pandemic. The recommendations were also embedded in the priorities of the Council Plan and the portfolio's business plan.

In response to a question from Councillor Dave Mackie on data information, the Chief Officer clarified that because of the decision made by the Welsh Government (WG) it was not possible to provide data on individual schools. She referred to section 1.01 of the report which reflected the current situation in schools and said all secondary schools had support plans in place to focus on the priorities that each school had identified. At 1.03 of the report information was provided on attendance and exclusions, which had been discussed at the last meeting.

In response to further comments around data, the Chief Officer explained that the working environment had changed, and she was unable to provide tables of data on examination results and the models for pupil assessment had changed making it difficult to compare data. She felt a workshop for Members would be beneficial to enable more information to be provided. The Local Quality Board had these in-depth discussions and at the next meeting the school performance monitoring processes would be discussed, and members would be able to join these discussions with the only external validation being the current Estyn inspection reports. This evaluation was a summary of the portfolio's performance over that year

Councillor Andrew Parkhurst referred to section 1.05 of the report which stated the role was to rigorously challenge schools and provide targeted support and said maybe it would be clearer for the Committee if an explanation was provided on how that was undertaken. In response, the Chief Officer said that this would tie in with a report from the School Performance Monitoring Group which would provide information on the escalation process. At those meetings the current situation of every school was discussed in detail with emerging issues or concerns highlighted and a plan put in place from either the Authority or GwE to support that school.

The Senior Manager for School Improvement confirmed that there was a clear support process and escalation process in place in schools. A report was brought to Committee last year on how this was being looked at regionally and those processes had been in place through the School Performance Monitoring Group for several years. She outlined how the 360 support plans and support for governance, finance or HR processes were provided to schools. She reported on her fortnightly meetings with the GwE Core Lead for Primary and Secondary as well as other meetings with colleagues from the Authority and GwE. This provided an overview of themes for individual schools or several schools to be established to enable specific professional development to be provided.

The recommendation, as outlined within the report, was moved by Councillor Bill Crease and seconded by Councillor Andrew Parkhurst.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee note the outcome of the Education Portfolio's annual self-evaluation report on the quality of education services for the period 2021-2022.

25. SCHOOL RESERVES YEAR ENDING 31 MARCH 2022

In presenting the annual report the Strategic Finance Manager (Schools) provided detailed information on the overall level of reserves held by Flintshire schools which had been impacted by the pandemic. She explained that the report had been shared with Head Teachers, the School Budget Forum and the Governance and Audit Committee.

The Strategic Finance Manager provided detailed information on the school reserves across the three sectors, highlighted the reserves for individual schools and the trends over the last 5 years. She referred to 2020 when there were worryingly

low levels of school reserves and said the increases over the past 2 years had been welcomed. This coincided with significant increased funding to schools by WG over the last 2 years and this was outlined at section 1.03 of the report with every school having specific reasons for the level of their school balances and individual plan in place for the future. There had to be a balance to ensure that the funding was spent on the education of the current pupils, and that excess amounts of funding were not being held back without clear reasons, so the school did not fall into deficit. She provided information on the Council's role in monitoring school reserves and explained that each school had been requested to complete a reserves declaration form and a Medium-Term Plan had been requested for the next 3 years outlining what schools were planning.

In response to a suggestion from Councillor Dave Mackie around ensuring tables were presented in the same format throughout reports, the Strategic Finance Manager agreed to ensure this was amended for future reports.

In response to a question from Councillor Mackie on actual reserves being distorted by grant funding, the Strategic Finance Manager said that last year the value of the grants was taken away from the reserves, however last year was different to this year as one of the biggest grants was for revenue repair and maintenance in schools which did not arrive until the last few days in March giving schools no opportunity to spend that money. Schools would have dealt with them in different ways some spending it straight away whilst others were using grants to fund work over the summer with this still in their balances. She said presenting it this way highlighted the increased level that schools had received and the potential impact on the level of school reserves.

In response to a question on increasing council tax to assist with deficit budgets in secondary schools, the Strategic Finance Manager confirmed that there was an additional amount of funding put into the secondary school's budget in 2020/2021 because of the Estyn recommendation 4 addressing secondary school deficits more effectively. This was outside of the secondary funding formula and targeted specifically towards deficit reduction. It had been effective but there had been a lot of grant funding provided so they had worked together to improve the financial position at those schools. She then provided information on meetings held with schools in line with the Protocol for Schools in Financial Deficit and support provided for schools who were not able to obtain a balanced budget and maintain a balanced curriculum.

Councillor Mackie said this was a difficult situation for schools and asked if the Strategic Finance Manager had seen any specific reasons for schools to understand why small secondary schools were struggling. In response, the Strategic Finance Manager felt there were two factors, but every school was different. Smaller schools were limited with the leadership and economy of scale especially if the community they served had deprived areas with families in poverty. She was undertaking research on this as regards to funding and how poverty affected educational attainment. She would be discussing this at the Secondary Heads meetings to see how these areas could be targeted in the formula more than what was there at present.

The recommendation, as outlined within the report, was moved by Councillor Gladys Healey and seconded by Councillor Dave Mackie.

RESOLVED:

That the level of school reserves as at the 31 March 2022 be noted.

26. UNIVERSAL PRIMARY FREE SCHOOL MEALS (UPFSM)

The report was introduced by the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) and contained an update on the roll out of the Universal Primary Free School Meal Programme (UPFSM) in Flintshire. This was a commitment made by Welsh Government (WG) with the authority opting for a phased approach. There had been significant challenges with NEWydd and schools which had been acknowledged by the Minister for Education and Welsh Language who had written to all Local Authorities expressing his thanks for their hard work. She provided information on the Working Group which had enabled the rollout to commence in September 2022 to Reception aged children with infant children in years 1 and 2 receiving their meals from April 2023 with all primary aged children receiving this by 2024. She stressed that those families who were entitled to Free School Meals must continue to apply for those benefits as so much funding goes into schools based on that entitlement to a free school meal. She was concerned that once this was universal that parents would be under the impression that they did not need to claim but this was so important and could have an adverse effect on the funding which went into schools.

Councillor Dave Mackie had concerns around the extra staff members that would be required and wondered if this should be included on the Forward Work Programme as he had been told there were issues around staffing to support free school meals. In response the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) confirmed that this was an area of concern saying NEWydd had had significant challenges recruiting. The portfolio and schools did what they could to support NEWydd and she was not aware of any school not being able to deliver this meal offer. This was a national issue with vacancies for catering, classroom assistants, specialist schools' staff and this was being monitored as the rollout continued.

Councillor Gladys Healey firstly thanked Welsh Government (WG) for doing this especially in the current climate. She said as a Governor we were able to write to parents to remind them to claim for their free school meals. The Chief Officer (Education & Youth) added that there had been a media campaign via social media and the website and asking schools to keep this message on their websites and newsletters.

The first recommendation, as outlined within the report, was moved by Councillor Dave Mackie and seconded by Councillor Andrew Parkhurst.

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

The third recommendation, as outlined within the report, was moved by Councillor Mel Buckley and seconded by Gina Maddison.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the committee note the progress made to date on implementation of UPFSM;
- (b) That the committee note the resource implications and risks identified in relation to UPFSM; and
- (c) That the committee support the UPFSM Policy and local implementation.

27. COUNCIL PLAN 2022-23 TIMELINE REVIEW

The Chair reported that for the Education & Youth portfolio there were 32 core business items on the timeline with estimated completion dates together with 7 project items with start dates and estimated completion dates.

The Chief Officer (Education & Youth) commented that when the Council Plan was presented to Committee there was concern that several of the actions had an end of year reporting date of the 31 March 2023. The Senior Management Team had reviewed these dates and some of the actions had been given earlier completion dates. She confirmed that updates on these would be given during the usual performance reporting cycle.

Councillor Dave Mackie asked if the date had passed did that mean that the action had been completed. The Chief Officer confirmed that this was correct.

The recommendation, as outlined within the report, was moved by Councillor Bill Crease and seconded by Councillor Gladys Healey.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee agree the Council Plan Part 1 reviewed and updated timelines for completion, as shown at Appendix 1 of the report.

28. MEMBERS OF THE PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There were no members of the press in attendance.

(The meeting started at 10.00 a.m. and ended at 12.24 pm)

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Chair