

EDUCATION, YOUTH & CULTURE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
1 FEBRUARY 2024

Minutes of the hybrid meeting of the Education, Youth & Culture Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held on Thursday 1 February 2024.

PRESENT: Councillor Teresa Carberry (Chair)

Councillors: Gladys Healey, Dave Mackie, Gina Maddison, Andrew Parkhurst, Carolyn Preece, David Richardson, Jason Shallcross and Arnold Woolley

CO-OPTEEs: Lisa Allen and Lynne Bartlett

SUBSTITUTIONS:

Councillor Mel Buckley (for Councillor Paul Cunningham), Councillor Andy Hughes (for Councillor Bill Crease) and Councillor Ted Palmer (for Councillor Ryan McKeown)

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillor Helen Brown attended as an observer

APOLOGIES:

Vicky Barlow (Senior Manager – School Improvement)

CONTRIBUTORS:

Councillor Mared Eastwood (Cabinet Member for Education, Welsh Language, Culture and Leisure); Councillor Dave Hughes (Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Streetscene and the Regional Transport Strategy); Councillor Paul Johnson (Cabinet Member for Finance, Inclusion, Resilient Communities including Social Value and Procurement); Chief Executive; Chief Officer (Education & Youth); Corporate Finance Manager; Post 16 and Adult Learning Adviser and Senior Manager, Youth Justice and Flintshire Sorted

IN ATTENDANCE:

Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator and Democratic Services Officers

40 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

Councillor Andrew Parkhurst declared a personal interest in agenda item 5 Council fund budget as his wife worked at a local primary school.

Councillor Mel Buckley declared a personal interest in agenda item 5 Council fund budget as her sister worked at a primary school in Flintshire.

41. MINUTES

30 November 2023

The minutes of the meeting held on the 30 November 2023 were presented for approval.

In response to a question from Councillor Dave Mackie on the Saltney Broughton Area Review the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) confirmed that a report would be presented to Cabinet and the Scrutiny Committee shortly. It was explained that this linked in with the future capital programme work.

The minutes of the meeting were approved, as moved and seconded by Councillors Carolyn Preece and Gladys Healey.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meetings held on 30 November 2023 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

42 FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME AND ACTION TRACKING

In presenting the report, the Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator outlined the items listed on the Forward Work Programme which was attached at Appendix 1. There were no proposed changes to the Forward Work Programme.

It was explained that following the last meeting there had been a number of changes to the Action Tracking report around the issues involving recruitment and retention, the amendment to the Additional Learning Needs items and Tackling the Impact of Inequality on Education Outcomes. The item on Demography was included as part of the Annual School Balances Report and the purpose shown on the Forward Work Programme had been amended to reflect this. A report had also been included on the Forward Work Programme on the Inspection Framework for Schools which would incorporate the Ask Ceri initiative.

The Chief Officer confirmed that the Forward Work Programme would be updated when the report from the Saltney Broughton Area Consultation was placed in the Cabinet cycle.

In response to a question from Councillor Gladys Healey on Theatr Clwyd the Chief Officer agreed to include an annual update item to the Forward Work Programme on the involvement of young people in the activities and to receive an update on the Flintshire Music Service.

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

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.

43 COUNCIL FUND BUDGET 2024/25

Introducing the report, the Corporate Finance Manager explained that this would be presented for consideration to all Overview & Scrutiny Committees. Regular updates on the Council's challenging budget position for 2024/25 had been provided to Members since last summer with the Welsh Government (WG) settlement announced on the 20th of December. He reflected on the Council's disappointing uplift of 2.2% compared with the Welsh average of 3.1% and to the summary of the key headlines which were reported to Cabinet on the 16 January which included the remaining gap of £12.946m. As a result, all portfolios had been asked to revisit and look at potential ways of reducing budgets or removing costs pressures to contribute towards meeting that gap. The report provided details of the additional proposals for the Education & Youth portfolio and the current proposals for Delegated Schools Budgets.

The Chief Officer (Education & Youth) commented on the two elements which had to be considered, the Education & Youth portfolio budget and the Delegated Schools Budgets, with point 1.05 in the report providing information on the proposed budget reductions. She thanked her Senior Managers for the work that they had undertaken scrutinising every line of their budgets saying that it was not an easy task to identify efficiencies whilst protecting the integrity of the service and enabling the portfolio to fulfil its statutory responsibilities. She referred to the RAG ratings for these services and highlighted the Youth Service which was showing as Amber.

The Chair invited questions and comments from the Committee on the budget proposals for the Education & Youth Portfolio.

Education & Youth Portfolio Budget Reductions

Councillor Andrew Parkhurst said that he believed that because of the financial difficulties the WG budget has presented the Council with each Portfolio had been asked to identify 7.5% of savings in order that Members could then decide which of those potential savings could be accepted or rejected and that Members would have a choice and make an informed decision. He said that there was a potential saving of £303,000 identified within the Education & Youth Portfolio excluding schools, but this did not equate to a 7.5% saving and he asked officers to clarify this. He also referred to the 8-month outturn for this financial year where there had been £367,000 of savings and asked how this had been identified as this was more than the savings proposed for the 2024/25 budget.

The Chief Officer advised that the total efficiencies identified did not equate to 7.5% of the overall budget for the Portfolio but explained that each Portfolio was asked to find up to 7.5% of efficiencies and that this was an aspiring target. Any further efficiencies above those identified would risk delivery of statutory services and risk the Council not being able to meet its statutory functions.

In relation to the £367,000 identified in-year efficiencies, the Chief Officer advised that this had come from a moratorium on the reduction or stopping of spend in each Portfolio. One of the reasons for this efficiency was around the provision of 3 year olds and early years education with pupil numbers not coming through as anticipated, which reflected the fall in birth rates in recent times. The Corporate Finance Manager

added that the Council looked for recurring reductions in budget as a sustainable way of reducing budget requirements for next year. The moratorium and temporary underspend were not reoccurring in nature but have been put in place to assist with the in-year overspend.

Councillor Gladys Healey asked if there was financial provision for any refugees that may settle within the County. The Chief Officer said yes to the best of her knowledge. There had been a number of families who had settled in Flintshire and education provision had been made for them. This was a challenge for all Local Authorities as it would not be made aware significantly in advance when the Home Office would direct them to receive families and children to be located in Flintshire. There was a structured process in place to manage this and the Council worked closely with schools which had been demonstrated in recent times.

Councillor Jason Shallcross asked if a further explanation could be given on the budget reductions for Youth Services around the asset transfer of some buildings. He believed the Council would incur a yearly cost for renting back space to use within the buildings in future. The Chief Officer explained that the challenge for Youth Services was that it had, under its control, a number of buildings which were not solely used for youth clubs, but by other organisations who pay rent under the Fees and Charges Policy. This was an expensive model. The Council was looking at appropriate community groups/parents to take over the buildings as an asset transfer and if an affective partnership was developed, the Youth Service could rent back what it needed to create the opportunity for efficiencies which would allow for additional funding of more youth workers out in the communities working with schools and young people to support them.

The Chief Executive advised that of the 2 current asset transfers, the one at Penyffordd was quite advanced, so should happen sooner and reduce the risk to the Council in meeting the budget reduction, as shown in the report.

Delegated Schools Budgets

The Chief Officer outlined the cost pressures for the Delegated Schools Budgets which included a significant pressure in relation to pay awards for teachers and support staff, as detailed in the report. Reference was made to the cost pressures around the management of foundation phase, specialist school provision, the increased cost pressures for Free School Meals, Transitional Rate Relief, NDR multiplier and the Specialist Mobile Classroom at the Specialist Primary School. A summary was provided on the reductions and adjustments within the Delegated Schools Budgets which included information on the reductions in costs for energy, reduction in pupil numbers and costs relating to performance around pensions. It was explained that following the proposal to remove £3m from the Delegated Schools Budgets this would still leave an uplift of 3.5% to their budgets.

The Chief Officer confirmed that the budget proposals had been presented and discussed at a meeting with Head Teachers and School Governors who understood why these decisions were being made.

Councillor Gladys Healey said that a consequence of cutting schools budgets by 3% may result in redundancies and asked would the Council be assisting financially with the cost of redundancies. The Leader of the Council advised that the cost of redundancies did not sit with the Council. The Council were there to advise and support schools who maybe in that difficult situation.

Councillor Dave Mackie said that he could not support a 3% reduction in school budgets and would suggest that a 3% reduction in the delivery of education to pupils would take the Council below an acceptable minimal level. He said that last year the school budgets were reduced by 3% and if the Council thought it acceptable to cut another 3% why not increase this figure last year. He also said that there was a lot of evidence that schools need to perform better, and they need improved budgets and if you look at the PISA results this was concerning as Wales were at the bottom across the UK and also information from WG showed that, in relation, to Mathematics, Reading and Science performance levels were below that of 2021.

In relation to School Balances, Councillor Mackie said that reserves had reduced by £5m meaning that schools has spent their budget allocation and an additional £5m, this was not all schools but it showed that schools were already operating at an unacceptable lowest level.

The Leader of the Council said that grouping all schools the same was disingenuous and unfair on headteachers, teachers and young people who were working hard to maintain education provision for young people to have the best possible standard of education. Members were aware of the problems this year with the budget, and he was currently working on a response with the Chief Executive and other finance officers to WG which would be robust and strong. Schools needed more budget; the Council needed more budget and WG needed more budget. He asked where Councillor Mackie proposed that the additional funding be found and whether Councillor Mackie would recommend an additional 3% to be added to Council Tax and ringfenced for schools. He said that nobody wanted to be in this position, but schools had the option to apply for a licenced deficit which the Council did not. The Council had to set a balanced budget.

Councillor Parkhurst asked if an explanation could be provided on what the funding of £1.124m entitled 'Unallocated Schools Budget' related to. It was agreed that a response be provided to the Committee following the meeting.

The recommendation, as outlined within the report, were moved by Councillor Ted Palmer and seconded by Councillor Carolyn Preece.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Education and Youth Portfolio's options to reduce budgets be noted; and
- (b) That the proposals for the delegated schools' budget be noted.

44 LEARNERS OUTCOME – GCSE AND A LEVEL RESULTS 2022/23

The Chief Officer (Education & Youth) introduced the report which provided an overview of GCSE and A-Level results for 2022/23. It had not been possible to compare examination results with previous years because of the varying examinations which had taken place since 2019. An update on the interim arrangements for key stage 4 and 5 was provided and it was explained that as a result of the pandemic there was a period of centre determined grades with adjustment made to grade boundaries. In 2019 Welsh Government (WG) decided that performance data would not be shared but had made a decision that some headline indicators of the 2023 summer results could be placed in the public domain and this information was outlined at point 1.01 of the report. Members were referred to points 1.05 and 1.06 of the report which included detail on the national outcomes for key stage 4 by pupil characteristics for the summer of 2023, and outcomes for key stage 4 in 2022/23 against the Wales average. Information was then provided on the proposed changes for Post 16 learners and point 1.10 of the report outlined the different measures used when monitoring performance. Members were referred to the Flintshire and National Outcomes at points 1.11, 1.12 and 1.13 in the report but it was highlighted that this data did not include all the appeals processes which had been undertaken. Information on the ALPS Education system was included at Point 1.14 of the report.

Councillor Carolyn Preece commended the Education & Youth Portfolio and all schools on their performance following Covid and applauded the effort and work that had been undertaken. She said that it was difficult to measure with not everyone achieving the same qualifications which could not be measured in the same way. Pupils were performing well in literacy, numeracy and the sciences which enabled them to progress to higher education.

The Leader agreed with the comments made and thanked the schools, teachers, parents, governors, and everyone involved for what had been achieved. He agreed with the comments made around the damage caused to the education system by the pandemic and felt the youngest children lost the most. The Chief Officer and himself pressed for younger children to return to school first and the then Minister Kirsty Williams agreed. He felt the very young children would be affected by this for the remainder of their time in education. He praised the staff for all their hard work helping children to catch up to where they would have been had the pandemic not happened.

The Chair recommended a second recommendation as follows, which was seconded by Councillor Carolyn Preece:-

- That the Chair, on behalf of the Committee, write to all Secondary Headteachers to thank them for their work in supporting their examination year groups.

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

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee note the outcomes for key stages 4 and 5 examinations in 2022/23 and recognise the hard work of secondary schools in Flintshire in supporting their examination year groups; and
- (b) That the Chair, on behalf of the Committee, write to all Secondary Headteachers to thank them for their work in supporting their examination year groups.

45 REVISION OF POST 16 STRATEGY

In presenting the report the Post 16 and Adult Learning Adviser commented that there were two points she wished to highlight. The first was that the operational date for the new Commission had changed from the 1 April to the 1 August 2024. This illustrated the unprecedented changes which were taking place within Post 16 provision which affected every sector and all providers up to higher education. Secondly, she wished to reassure members that the Council was very involved in informing and influencing the statement of priorities in the New Commission and that she was a member of the National Adult Learning Wales Partnership which held monthly briefings with Welsh Government and Officials specifically around the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER). The portfolio was also represented on the 14 to 19 Regional Group which met nationally specifically looking at financing for Post 16 and the changes which were being introduced under the new proposals. This information was fed back to the six counties in the North. Vicky Barlow, Senior Manager for School Improvement, was a member of the Regional Skills Board where apprenticeships were discussed with CTER having a role. With regard to schools sixth forms, it was reported that work was ongoing with GwE to enable opportunities for Head Teachers of schools with Sixth Forms to meet with the new Chief Executive of CTER to enable schools to influence the statement of priorities going forward.

Councillor Carolyn Preece commented said this could be a massive improvement with all areas working as one. She had looked at the membership of the Commission which include high level professional professors who would be guiding in this area. She felt this would bring everyone together and provide a flow through the education process and felt that this was a positive move forward. She looked forward to receiving reports on this in the future.

The recommendation, as outlined within the report, was moved by Councillor Carolyn Preece and seconded by Councillor Arnold Woolley.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee confirm that it has received an appropriate level of assurance regarding the work of the Education & Youth Portfolio in supporting schools with sixth form provision to be able to meet the requirement of the new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research.

46 FEEDBACK FROM YOUTH JUSTICE SERVICE REVIEW

The report was introduced by the Senior Manager for Youth Justice and Flintshire Sorted and included the findings from the Youth Justice Peer Review which was completed by the Youth Justice Sector Peer Improvement Partnership in October 2023. This was not an inspection but a requested peer review which was part of the service's continuous improvement programme. Discussions had been held with the Chief Executive and Chief Officer which had identified key lines for enquiry specifically looking at the strength of leadership and governance of the Youth Justice Service Executive Management Board and the partnerships which were represented on that Board.

The information the board received was of good quality and identified that the Youth Justice Service was making progress on its priorities and plans. It was also identified that some external partners should take ownership of some of the strategic issues with some priorities held by the Local Authority. The Peer Review noted the commitment of the service and its Management Board and Partners to a child first and trauma informed approach which was commended within the report. Practitioners were commended for the creative way that they engaged with children and young people. Some areas for improvement related to the delivery group which sat under the Youth Justice Management Board and the over reliance on the Youth Justice Service and Local Authority to drive some of the improvement plans. Information was provided on the recommendations and areas of consideration made in response to observations of the Peer Review and the progress of the delivery plans which were highlighted at points 2.03 and 2.04 in the report.

The Chief Officer (Education & Youth) commented that the report provided a level of assurance, and this had been a useful exercise to sense check where the Service was and strategically assess its own plans for improvement. She provided background on how the service had moved to a stand-alone service and that having the Chief Executive as Chair of the Youth Justice Management Board highlighted how important this was.

Councillor Gina Maddison offered her congratulations on an excellent report.

The recommendation, as outlined within the report, were moved by Councillor Arnold Woolley and seconded by Councillor Dave Mackie.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee note the recommendations from the Peer Review.

47 COUNCIL PLAN 2023-24 MID-YEAR PERFORMANCE REPORTING

The Chief Officer (Education & Youth) presented the mid-year performance report saying that regular updates were provided to committee on the progress of council priorities in the Council Plan for 2023/24. This was an exemption-based report and focused on areas which were not currently achieving their target. Point 1.05 in the

report highlighted that there were no activities or performance indicators showing a Red RAG Status for the portfolio. There was a lot of work still being undertaken with regard to the delivery of the Council Plan Priorities.

Following a number of questions from Councillor Dave Mackie the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) provided detailed responses to questions in relation to Attendance levels and the Educational Welfare Service, children who were struggling to re-engage with school following the pandemic, the appointment of Engagement Workers and the adoption of the Digital Strategy in schools.

The overall objective was to raise attendance levels and the Chief Officer was happy to report that attendance levels were improving, and that the authority was currently fourth in Wales. It was confirmed that the comment described within the report was around what action was required and what steps were being taken to continue to improve attendance levels. Information was given on the development of better more effective processes within schools ensuring that the Education Welfare Service used that data to target their interventions more effectively in schools.

It was explained that the use of the Community Focus Schools Grant made available by Welsh Government (WG) had enabled engagement workers working with schools and families to tackle the core issues which led to young people not attending school or struggling to maintain their place. This was an action to deliver the overall objective of trying to reduce exclusions.

In response to a question from Councillor Ted Palmer regarding school attendance as a result of the Pandemic, the Chief Officer commented that this was a national issue and the National Attendance Task Force had been created by the Minister to address this. An outline of the partners sitting on this Task Force was given and the Chief Officer attended the first meeting the previous week. She agreed to circulate two reports prepared by parent charities which were presented to that meeting and highlighted the shift in attitude of pupils and parents around attendance. It was explained that for children to attend school the curriculum had to be appropriate, exciting and engaging. It was explained how the new curriculum focused on these aspects.

Councillor Carolyn Preece commended the Officers for the report which showed that there were no Red statuses and commented that the performance targets for each of the areas currently showing an Amber and Green status were achievable.

Councillor Gladys Healey referred to the attendance levels and asked if home schooling levels would be increasing and asked if the Home Schooling Officer could attend a meeting of the Committee to provide an update on progress.

The Chief Officer confirmed that post pandemic there had been an increase in the number of parents electing to home educate their children. A report was presented to Committee last year around home education data and how the Educational Welfare Service undertook its statutory function monitoring these children with regard to the education provided. It was explained that the portfolio was fulfilling its statutory responsibilities in terms of monitoring the register with a senior team officer sitting on the National Group for Elective Home Education. The Facilitator explained that a report

on Attendance and Exclusion was scheduled for the May meeting and that an invitation would be sent to the Home-Schooling Officer to attend.

It was proposed that an additional recommendation be added as follows:-

- That the thanks of the Committee be passed to all staff to thank them for their hard work in achieving the key priority targets against the Council Plan 2023/24 performance indicators/measures.

The recommendations, as outlined within the report, and including the additional recommendation proposed above, were moved by Councillor Carolyn Preece and seconded by Councillor Gladys Healey.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee support the levels of progress and confidence in the achievement of priorities as detailed within the Council Plan 2023/28 for delivery within 2023/24;
- (b) That the Committee support overall performance against the Council Plan 2023/24 performance indicators/measures;
- (c) That the Committee is assured by explanations given for those areas of underperformance; and
- (d) That the thanks of the Committee be passed to all staff to thank them for their hard work in achieving the key priority targets against the Council Plan 2023/24 performance indicators/measures.

48. 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 3.56 pm)

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Chair