

EDUCATION AND YOUTH OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
26 SEPTEMBER 2019

Minutes of the meeting of the Education and Youth Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held in the Council Chamber, County Hall, Mold on Thursday, 26 September, 2019

PRESENT: Councillor David Healey (Chairman)

Councillors: Janet Axworthy, Geoff Collett, Bob Connah, Paul Cunningham, Andy Dunbobbin, Gladys Healey, Kevin Hughes, David Mackie, Ian Smith and Martin White

CO-OPTED MEMBERS: Lynn Bartlett and David Hytch

APOLOGIES: Rebecca Stark

CONTRIBUTORS: Councillor Ian Roberts, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Education; Chief Officer (Education & Youth); Schools Finance Manager, Senior Manager Inclusion and Progression, and Senior Manager for School Improvement

IN ATTENDANCE: Education and Youth Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator and Democratic Services Officer

16. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

17. MINUTES

- (i) The minutes of the meeting held on the 27 June 2019 were submitted.

Accuracy

Page 6, 3rd paragraph: Councillor Dave Mackie asked that the minutes be amended to read: 'Councillor Mackie commented that the GCSE level 2+ is considered to be the gold standard achievement but StatsWales shows that between 2013, when GwE took over, and 2018 the percentage of pupils achieving that standard in every county in North Wales has dropped. Only three other counties have dropped, 13 have improved. North Wales counties have dropped 37 positions during that time. At their meeting in November 2018 the GwE Joint Committee stated: "The Secondary Schools Improvement Strategy (September 2017) sets out the direction for regional developments over the next three years".' Councillor Mackie asked if the Committee could see that strategy and hoped it identified changes, included targets, and showed progress.

Page 7, 4th paragraph: Mr David Hytch asked that the first sentence be amended to read: 'The Chairman said that there had been considerable progress made in the performance of Welsh language at primary level but raised concerns around the difficulties in recruiting trained linguists to teach Welsh as a second language as well as staff at all levels able to teach through the medium of Welsh'.

- (ii) The minutes of the Joint meeting of the Education & Youth and Social & Health Overview & Scrutiny meeting held on 25 July 2019 were submitted.

RESOLVED:

That, subject to the above amendments, the minutes be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

18. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME AND ACTION TRACKING

The Facilitator presented the Forward Work Programme which had been updated following the last meeting and was attached as Appendix 1. She drew attention to the items to be considered at the next meeting of the Committee to be held on 7 November 2019.

The Facilitator referred to the actions arising from the previous meeting of the Committee and reported on the outcomes as detailed in appendix 2 of the report. She advised that a report on the work of the Music Service had been added to the Forward Work Programme as an item to be scheduled later in the year.

The Facilitator referred to the actions arising from the meeting of the Joint Education & Youth and Social & Health Care Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on 25 July, and explained that a letter had been sent to the Welsh Government Minister for Education outlining the Committee's concerns, for the Authority and schools in Flintshire, around the resource implications of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018. She reported that the Minister had responded and she would send a copy of the letter sent by the Chair and the response received to the Committee following the meeting. The Facilitator also provided an update on the actions arising following the concerns raised by the Joint Committee around the need for adequate resources to meet the challenges of Out of County placements. She advised that a letter would be sent to the Welsh Government Minister for Health and Social Services setting out the Authority's business case and asking for funding, and she would send a copy of the letter to the Committee as soon as available.

The Senior Manager Inclusion and Progression provided an update on the introduction of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 and confirmed that following the consultation period, Welsh Government (WG) had delayed the introduction of the Act in order to accommodate necessary adjustments. Anticipated implementation would now be from 2021 but confirmation on whether additional funding to assist with the implementation would be forthcoming was awaited.

Councillor Dave Mackie asked if an item on the Schools Funding Formula could be scheduled on the Committee's Forward Work Programme for consideration at a future meeting. The Schools Finance Manager explained that the Schools Funding Formula was currently being reviewed and was annually reviewed with the Schools Budget Forum. She agreed to provide a report to the Committee later in the year.

In response to the concerns raised by Councillor Geoff Collett around the need for adequate funding for schools the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) explained that a robust campaign had been presented to the Welsh Government by the Chief Executive, Leader of the Council, and other Associations, to ensure that local government received its fair share of any additional funding in order to meet the financial pressures of the teacher's pay awards and pension contributions and also the need for significant investment in Education.

The Chair referred to the North Wales Growth Deal and expressed concerns around digital connectivity for schools. The Chief Officer (Education) gave an assurance that schools were a priority in terms of the overall infrastructure and connectivity and significant progress was being made to ensure all schools had the same level of access to digital provision. She invited the Senior Manager for School Improvement to give a brief update on the progress being made to improve digital connectivity and it was agreed that a report would be provided to a meeting of the Committee early next year on the Digital Projects at Schools.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Forward Work Programme as amended, be approved;
- (b) That the Facilitator, in consultation with the Chairman 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.

19. SCHOOL RESERVE BALANCES YEAR ENDING 31 MARCH 2019

The Chief Officer (Education and Youth) introduced a report to provide the Committee with details of the closing balances held by Flintshire schools at the end of the financial year. She referred to the overall level of reserves held by Flintshire schools which had increased compared with the previous year. The overall secondary schools net deficit had increased by £0.169m (13.1%). This was offset by a £0.172m (7.2%) increase in primary school reserves and £0.057m increases in specialist school reserves. The analysis of reserve balances for each school at the end of March 2019 was appended to the report.

The Chief Officer advised that secondary school budgets continued to be under pressure. At the end of the financial year 7 of Flintshire's 11 secondary schools had deficits amounting to £1.879m. The level of reserves held by secondary schools with positive balances was 1% of budget which highlighted concerns about the financial resilience of the secondary school sector in Flintshire. The Chief Officer explained that ongoing austerity measures and demographic changes were factors which contributed to the financial position and raised the question whether the funding formula provided sufficient resources for smaller secondary schools to operate sustainably. Pressure on secondary school budgets was replicated across England and Wales.

Commenting on the position of primary schools in Flintshire, the Chief Officer advised that primary balances had held up well despite the ongoing

pressure of austerity, however, primary pupil numbers were forecast to reduce and this would create challenges for Primary Headteachers in managing budget in the future. At the end of the financial year there were 6 primary schools with deficit balances compared with 3 primary schools in the previous year.

The Chief Officer reported on the main considerations around school balances, as detailed in the report. She said that overall the value of surplus balances in Flintshire schools exceeded that of deficit balances. She explained that, in practice, surplus balances were already committed by schools to specific projects, or to cover the uncertainty of funding and changes in pupil numbers. In accordance with the Regulations, the Authority's Scheme for Financing Schools required schools to submit a spending plan as to the use that the governing body proposed to make of a school balance which exceeded specified limits.

The Chief Officer also reported on deficit balances and advised that as funding levels to schools decreased due to the austerity measures facing local government there was a risk that more schools would move into a deficit position. She referred to Recommendation 4 in the Estyn Inspection Report following the recent Inspection of the Authority's Education services and said that the Education and Youth Portfolio Management Team and Schools' Finance Team had agreed a range of actions which would form part of the Authority's response to Estyn to address the recommendation to manage the reduction in school budget deficits more effectively.

Councillor Ian Roberts expressed his thanks to the Chief Officer, Schools Finance Manager and her Team, Headteachers, and Governing Bodies, for their hard work and proactive management of school budgets. He spoke of the pressure of continuing austerity, the uncertainty around funding in the future, and the difficult decisions that were made by Headteachers and Governing Bodies on a regular basis.

In response to the comments and concerns raised by Councillor Dave Mackie around the schools funding formula, the Chief Officer and Schools Finance Manager referred to the work undertaken by the Schools Accounting Team with schools which had a surplus balance to scrutinise school spending plans and provide guidance. The Schools Finance Manager advised that the spending plans were also reviewed by the Portfolio Management Team.

Mr David Hytch proposed that the Committee urged the Authority, notwithstanding the Estyn recommendation R4 and recognising that schools are not entitled to set a deficit budget, to continue to support schools in financial difficulty with a view to resolving deficits without detriment to pupils' learning. The proposal was seconded by Councillor Andy Dunbobbin.

In response to a concern raised by Councillor Gladys Healey, the Schools Finance Manager explained that pupil numbers were a key part of the schools funding formula.

Councillor David Williams asked if the number of pupils in Flintshire's schools could be included within the table showing the final school balances. The Schools Finance Manager agreed to provide this information to the Committee and include in future reports.

The Chair commented on the issue of inflationary increases in teachers' pay and pensions and proposed that a letter be sent to Kirsty Williams, Assembly Member and Cabinet Secretary for Education, to outline the Committee's concerns around school balances, which were replicated across Wales, and the lack of clarity around funding for teachers' pay awards and increasing pension contributions.

Councillor Ian Roberts supported the proposal and suggested that Governing Bodies of schools in Flintshire might also wish to send a letter to the Minister, Assembly Members, and MPs, to outline their concerns and difficulties.

Councillor David Williams suggested that the issue of deficit budgets in some schools also be included in the letter to the Minister.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the school reserves balances as at the 31 March 2019 be noted;
- (b) That the Committee urges the Authority, notwithstanding the Estyn recommendation R4 and recognising that schools are not entitled to set a deficit budget, to continue to support schools in financial difficulty with a view to resolving deficits without detriment to pupils' learning; and
- (c) That a letter be written, on behalf of the Committee, to the Welsh Government Minister for Education outlining the Committee's concerns around school balances, which were clearly replicated across Wales, and seeking clarity around funding for the teacher's pay awards and increasing pension contributions.

20. ESTYN INSPECTION OF FLINTSHIRE'S EDUCATION SERVICES

The Chief Officer (Education and Youth) introduced a report on the outcome of the recent Estyn Inspection of the Flintshire County Council Education Services. She advised that the Education and Youth Portfolio was very pleased with the positive outcome of the Inspection, the positive nature of the Estyn report, and the significant areas of strength acknowledged by the Estyn team in the provision for learners in Flintshire. The Inspection report also confirmed the strong leadership of education services across the Council.

The Chief Officer advised that where Estyn had felt improvements were necessary they were reflected in the recommendations in the Inspection report for the Council to address. She explained they had already been identified as priorities through the Portfolio's own self-evaluation processes and included as actions in the Portfolio Business Plan (called a Post Inspection Action Plan). Progress on the recommendations would be reported regularly to Cabinet and to the Education & Youth Overview and Scrutiny Committee. She advised that a report on the Estyn Post Inspection Action Plan would be presented to the next meeting of the Committee on 7 November.

The Chief Officer expressed thanks to her team for their hard work and for the support of all involved during the Inspection process. She said the Inspection

Team had been fair but rigorous and reiterated that the Education & Youth Portfolio were very pleased with the outcome.

Councillor Ian Roberts also expressed his thanks to the Chief Officer and her team, Headteachers, and all involved for their hard work and the positive outcome which reflected the quality of service provided for learners and young people in Flintshire.

The Chair expressed congratulations on behalf of the Committee to the Chief Officer and her team for their achievement and also the case study from Flintshire being used on the Estyn website to show effective practices in the early learning development.

In response to comments from Councillor Geoff Collett around life-skills of pupils, the Chief Officer advised that a new curriculum model would be introduced which would give schools greater flexibility particularly at a later level to ensure that the curriculum was broad and meet the needs of individual learners, moving away from naming and shaming schools that did not meet the gold standard. The Senior Manager for School Improvement emphasised that Health and Well-being would be equally weighted alongside academic achievements in the new curriculum.

The Chairman commented on the issues previously raised by the Committee around GCSE outcomes in English Language in the summer of 2018 and the anomalies in setting the grade boundaries. In response, the Senior Manager for School Improvement advised that changes of grade boundaries had been discussed at the recent Headteacher Federation but the issues experienced last year were not an emerging theme this year. There had been an assurance from the WJEC that standards were the same across all examination boards and this matter was being closely monitored.

Mr David Hytch commented on the issue of performance management and the lack of funding for schools in Flintshire. He proposed that the following recommendation be added to the Committee report: 'That the Committee deplores Estyn's failure to highlight the lack of funding that blights education in Flintshire'. When put to the vote this was agreed by the Committee.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Estyn report on education services in Flintshire and its findings be acknowledged; and
- (b) That the Committee deplores Estyn's failure to highlight the lack of funding that blights education in Flintshire.

21. SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AND EXCLUSIONS

The Senior Manager (Inclusion and Progression) introduced a report on the portfolio's performance in relation to school attendance and exclusions for 2017-18; an overview of the Education Social Work Team and a revised schedule for future reporting. She advised that the revised format would ensure that Members had the opportunity to consider and question the data and this would

support further monitoring of progress against the recent Estyn inspection recommendations relating to the areas of attendance and exclusion.

The Senior Manager explained that attendance across Flintshire schools was showing a general trend of reduction, with illness accounting for the majority of absences. Levels of persistent absenteeism were comparatively high. In line with national trends, levels of permanent and fixed-term exclusion were increasing, particularly in secondary schools.

Councillor Dave Mackie raised a number of points around consistency and the formatting of the data on attendance in the tables in Appendix 1 of the report. He commented on the issue of exclusions and emphasised the need to engage with young people to keep them in education and the implications this would have for the remainder of a child's life. He spoke of the need for adequate funding to be provided to schools to support that provision. The Senior Manager agreed to amend the format of the data presented in the tables for future reports and responded to the points raised by Councillor Mackie. She also referred to the purpose of exclusion and commented on the work undertaken by schools to be creative in the use of sanctions. She said that funding was a major issue in terms of how schools could be as effective and supportive in dealing with inappropriate behaviour as they would wish to.

The Senior Manager advised that the Authority would be submitting a bid for grant funding for mental health which could be used for training and individual packages to help and support young people. She commented on the need to work closely with the Health Board to ensure that the systems and services provided by schools were as effective as possible.

The Chief Officer commented that the individual schools report from Estyn advised that pupils' behaviour in Flintshire schools was good. However, there was a need to acknowledge the increasing exposure around young people concerning drug related issues and the impact that difficult childhood experiences had on children. In summary the Chief Officer commented on the need for specialist intervention and said "a child excluded was a child at risk". She said schools were expected to make the decision to exclude a pupil very carefully and consider whether there were any alternative options to deal with that incident at that time.

Mr David Hytch commented on the issue of unauthorised absences during term time. The Senior Manager acknowledged the points raised and advised that schools would be challenged around the level of absence that they authorise, which may result in an increased level of unauthorised absence across the county. She also advised that the Welsh Government had stated that pupils could have 10 days holiday related absence per academic year and in Flintshire there were very few children who exceeded this 10 day allowance.

Councillor Andy Dunbobbin spoke of the valuable contribution made by third sector organisations to help young people overcome their difficulties.

Councillor Gladys Healey commented on the waiting list to see a child psychologist and said there was a need to employ more specialised staff to deal with mental health issues in young people. She also commented on the impact

of bullying in schools which she said could cause problems for children later in life.

The Chief Officer advised that all schools had robust behaviour management policies designed to promote positive behaviour by pupils and to outline the consequences if not. The Chief Officer referred to the significant work undertaken in schools to promote health and well-being and the systems in place to ensure that behavioural issues were managed and supported swiftly and effectively.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be noted; and
- (b) That the Committee note the contribution made by 3rd sector organisations to support those children at risk.

22. YEAR-END COUNCIL PLAN MONITORING REPORT 2018/19

The Chief Officer (Education & Youth) presented the 2018/19 year-end progress report on the Council Plan for 2018/23 providing analysis on the priority 'Learning Council' which was relevant to the Committee.

The Chief Officer advised that the monitoring report for the 2018/19 Council Plan was a positive report, with 92% of activities being assessed as having made good progress and 89% on track to achieve the desired outcome. Performance indicators showed good progress with 70% on target, 20% being monitored and 10% off track. Risks were also being successfully managed with the majority being assessed as moderate (64%), minor (14%) or significant (11%).

Councillor Dave Mackie drew attention to pages 98 and 99 of the report, IP 3.1.1.6 and IP 3.1.1.7, and said no data had been provided for the actual year. He also referred to page 103, IP 3.1.6.1, and said there was no data for the previous year. Officers provided clarification around the analysis presented.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

23. MEMBERS OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC IN ATTENDANCE

There were no members of the press or public in attendance.

(The meeting started at 2.00 pm and ended at 4.25 pm)

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Chairman