

EDUCATION, YOUTH & CULTURE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

21 OCTOBER 2021

Minutes of the virtual meeting of the Education, Youth & Culture Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held on Thursday 21 October 2021.

PRESENT: Councillor David Healey (Chair)

Councillors: Janet Axworthy, Bob Connah, Paul Cunningham, Gladys Healey, Joe Johnson, Tudor Jones, Dave Mackie, Martin White

CO-OPTED MEMBER:

Lynn Bartlett

IN ATTENDANCE

Councillor Christine Jones (Deputy Leader for Partnerships & Cabinet Member for Social Services) and Councillor David Wisinger

APOLOGIES:

Councillor Ian Smith; Mrs Wendy White; Councillor Ian Roberts, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Education and Senior Manager (School Improvement)

CONTRIBUTORS:

Chief Officer (Education & Youth); Senior Manager (Inclusion and Progression) Learning Advisor (Health Well Being and Safeguarding) and Alex Jones (PE Teacher Connah's Quay High School) (for agenda item 5)

IN ATTENDANCE:

Education Youth & Culture Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator and Democratic Services Support Officer

22. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

There were no declarations of interest.

23. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 September were received.

Matters arising:

Councillor Dave Mackie raised a number of clerical errors within the minutes. It was agreed that they would be amended within the final version of the minutes.

Councillor Dave Mackie also asked that his comments around the reports on the Budget 2022/23 – Stage 2 and Covid-19 Schools Operational Update be

amended to better reflect his comments. His suggestions were supported by the Committee.

Councillor Tudor Jones sought clarification when feedback would be available on how the proposed £1m investment would be disseminated to schools. The Chief Officer replied that this was not available as it was dependent upon the budget settlement. This would also be referred to the member briefing session on the budget prior to Christmas and that there would be opportunities for Members to comment prior to the budget setting next year.

The minutes, subject to the amendments suggested, were moved as a correct record by Councillor Janet Axworthy and Councillor Martin White.

RESOLVED:

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

24. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME AND ACTION TRACKING

The Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator presented the report confirming the amendments made to the Forward Work Programme since the last meeting. There was an additional suggested amendment, which was to submit a report on Part 1 of the Council Plan 2022/23 to the 3rd February, 2022 meeting.

Referring to the actions outlined at Appendix 2 of the report, the Facilitator confirmed that a letter had been sent to all schools from the Chair on behalf of the Committee. Regarding the Social Media and Internet Safety item this had been deferred to February with a workshop being arranged prior to that meeting for Members on the "Be Kind Pledge". This briefing would also include information around social media.

Responding to questions from Councillor Tudor Jones on the budget pressures and delivery of Additional Learning Needs (ALN) in different schools, the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) stated that it was a very complex issue. Schools were in the middle of significant change as regards to the delivery for ALN and work was being carried out with head teachers to ascertain how budgets were best used to support this. The Chief Officer suggested submitting a summary report to Committee in June, 2022.

The Senior Manager (Inclusion and Progression) reported on the work being undertaken with Primary Head Teachers around budget allocation and how this would be carried out under the new system. The Committee had focused on the impact of the new legislation but a review of the whole process, looking at the services offered to schools and how this was financed, would be beneficial for the Committee. The Chief Officer suggested that Councillor Tudor Jones meet with the Senior Manager in order to gain a better understanding of the work being carried out. Councillor Tudor Jones thanked the Chief Officer and Senior Manager saying he would take up the offer in the New Year.

In response to a question from Councillor Dave Mackie on the increase in re-sit examinations in November, the Chief Officer referred to a recent meeting held with Secondary Head Teachers and said that this had not been highlighted. She agreed to speak to the Senior Manager (School Improvement) and send Councillor Mackie further information following the meeting. The Chief Officer referred to the Forward Work Programme saying that this could be included in the Assessment for Examinations for 2022 report being presented to the Committee in February, 2022.

The Chief Officer suggested that a report on the Welsh Government (WG) Programmes Summer of Fun and Winter of Well-being be included for the Joint meeting with the Social & Health Care O&S Committee in June. The very successful Summer of Fun programme had identified key strands that would support the work moving forward for the well-being of children and young people. The next strand of the WG programme would be “the winter of well-being”. The Chief Officer reported on the powerful and positive impacts that this had made to the children and families that were involved.

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

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.

25. SCHOOL HOLIDAY ENRICHMENT PROGRAMME REVIEW

The Chief Officer (Education & Youth) presented a report which provided an overview of the approach taken to deliver the School Holiday Enrichment Programme (SHEP) ‘Food and Fun’ during the holiday period. This was the third year that the programme had been delivered in Flintshire and its most successful to date, reinforcing the positive impact strong partnership working could have within communities.

The Learning Advisor reported that the SHEP programme was delivered across Wales using a partnership approach involving schools, health professionals, local authorities and community sports staff. In Flintshire, this consisted of Aura Leisure, NEWydd Catering and BCUHB Dieticians, all coordinated by the Healthy Schools team.

The Chairman welcomed Mr. Alex Jones (PE Teacher at Connah’s Quay High School). Mr. Alex Jones introduced himself to Committee and provided an overview of his teaching role at Connah’s Quay High School. The school felt that because of the pandemic, vulnerable pupils would struggle with the transition to high school and that taking part in the programme would provide an opportunity for the school to work with primary schools to identify those children who would

benefit from the SHEP. Mr. Alex Jones gave a presentation which covered the following areas:-

- SHEP Timetable
 - This included an overview of the sports provided, nutrition sessions and internal enrichment sessions and the family meal packs.
- What's happened since SHEP @ CQHS
 - Friendships formed by current year 7's –
 - the games were focused on team building and communication to build confidence
 - six nutrition sessions were provided over the 12 days
 - Members of Connah's Quay High School held events such as Arts and Crafts and T-shirt design
 - Pete Hawley, another member of the CQHS staff team, provided bush craft sessions
 - External companies included AURA, Welsh Rugby and Connah's Quay Nomads football team
 - Commitment from the head teacher for SHEP 2022
 - More Connah's Quay High School Staff on board for 2022

Councillor Martin White commended Mr. Alex Jones and his team on SHEP and commented on the positive responses from parents and young people. He thought the recipe cards were a great initiative and asked whether this could be shared with all pupils by the schools to encourage pupils to get involved in cooking and eating healthily. He raised concerns around WG not confirming funding beyond 2021 and suggested that the Committee write to the WG to highlight how beneficial the SHEP had been and encourage future funding to be provided. The Learning Advisor advised that the sharing of recipe cards was being considered. The recipes were used by NEWydd for school meals and it was hoped to grow the cooking practical skills and activities and bring parents on board. The Chief Officer (Education & Youth) was confident that WG would continue to fund the SHEP due to their focus around poverty, children's development and well-being.

In response to a question from Councillor Dave Mackie, the Learning Advisor confirmed that funding was provided retrospectively from WG, with schools paying for the programme and being reimbursed by WG following submission of evidence of the costs.

Councillor Tudor Jones suggested an amendment to the recommendation to read "The Education, Youth and Culture Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the success and progress of the SHEP Programme". This suggestion was supported by the Committee.

The Facilitator referred to the suggestion made by Councillor Martin White that the Committee write to the WG to seek confirmation of future funding. She suggested that Councillor Dave Mackie's concern around retrospective funding also be included in the letter. This suggestion was supported by the Committee.

The recommendations, as listed above, were moved by Councillor Martin White and seconded by Councillor Paul Cunningham.

The Chairman thanked the Learning Advisor and Mr. Alex Jones for their report and the valuable work they were undertaking.

RESOLVED:

- (a) The Education, Youth and Culture Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the success and progress of the SHEP Programme; and
- (b) That a letter from the Committee be sent to the Welsh Government seeking confirmation of future funding for the SHEP and to raise concerns around retrospective funding.

26. ELECTIVE HOME EDUCATION

The Chief Officer (Education & Youth) introduced the report which provided an overview of Elective Home Education (EHE) picture across Flintshire and the role undertaken by the Council with regards to monitoring and support.

The Senior Manager (Inclusion and Progression) explained education was compulsory but that parents had a choice on how that was delivered with some choosing to send their children to school and others choosing to electively home educate their child. There was no responsibility placed on parents to inform the authority that they would be electively home educating their child. If a child had not entered the education system then the authority would not be aware of that child. There were processes in place if a child was removed from school and the authority would be informed and a pack would be sent to the parents for completion.

The Senior Manager explained that children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) was potentially an area of concern and that the authority did have some powers in this regard to ensure the education met the requirements of any statements of SEN. She confirmed that parents did not have to follow the national curriculum and the authority did not have any powers to see the child or view what education was provided. The responsibility to monitor this sat with the Education Welfare Service partly because of their expertise around safeguarding. The officers play a key role visiting homes annually as part of the monitoring process and raising any safeguarding concerns where necessary. Since 2020 funding had been received for this and Welsh Government (WG) had confirmed that they would be considering on-going funding on a 3 year basis. The funding, which had not been provided before, allowed for some officer support to enable the authority to discharge its responsibility. This provided £14,000 for parents to purchase specific items such as laptops and desks and funding for educational visits. This year junior passes for Aura were purchased to support these children to engage in activity and meet other children. The Senior Manager reported that WG had been looking at their policy for Elective Home Education for a number of years but as yet had not provided the authority with the statutory powers required to monitor this area fully.

Councillor Tudor Jones commented on the reasons for becoming home educated as shown in the WG data, attached at appendix 1 of the report, and said that two of the top reasons contained the word 'anxiety'. He asked whether the SHEP programme, as discussed earlier in the meeting, would assist in

reducing anxiety for children transitioning from primary to secondary school. In response, the Senior Manager confirmed that the TRAC Programme was extended to cover year 6 pupils and identified children who were anxious about transitioning to year 7. Primary Schools identified children who had high levels of anxiety and individual programmes were put in place for those pupils. The Chairman commented that it was important that parents were made aware of the TRAC and SHEP programmes which could assist in reducing their child's anxiety in attending high school.

In response to concerns raised by the Chairman around home educated children following the national curriculum and gaining qualifications, the Senior Manager confirmed that a proposal currently being considered by WG was around the creation of a national register so that all parents had to register their child but that there was some opposition to this. She added that some children were receiving an excellent programme of education tailored to their needs. Safeguarding sat with the Education Welfare Service who were able to identify this when they made their visits.

Councillor Gladys Healey commented that if a child was in school but did not attend then parents could be prosecuted and asked how this would be enforced with home educated children. In response the Senior Manager confirmed that the authority had powers to address this as part of the School Attendance Order which could be used if the right provision of education was not provided.

Councillor Dave Mackie referred to the monitoring role of the authority to ensure the child was receiving a suitable education and asked how this could be achieved if no additional funding to support EHE was available, particularly given the high number of children being educated at home. He also raised concerns around the lack of social interaction that children being education at home were exposed to.

In response, the Senior Manager outlined the challenges for the authority to carry out their monitoring role, if parents did not wish to share information or engage with the authority. With regards to funding, this could be used to appoint a dedicated officer to engage with families and arrange joint events with other families. The current Welsh government grant funding was guaranteed until March 2022 but it was not clear from WG if it would continue following this date.

Mrs. Lynne Bartlett gave examples of parents who had withdrawn their children from her school due to health or anxiety issues. She explained that these parents had been well meaning and had provided an excellent balanced education for their children. She also provided examples of where, together with the Education Welfare Officer, she had offered support to families who had decided to home educate their children. Referring to the data provided to the Committee and the high numbers of EHE in Carmarthen, she said that there was a well organised group who supported these families. She was surprised that the numbers had not increased because of Covid, which was a credit to the teachers across Flintshire. She was slightly concerned around the EHE numbers for children transitioning from primary to secondary school and said that there was a need to improve transition programmes but felt reassured by the presentation of the report by officers.

The Chief Officer thanked Mrs Lynne Bartlett for her comments as it was important to show that the authority were not critical of parents who wished to educate their children at home. Some parents chose this option for the right reasons and enable their children to emerge as well rounded successful adults. She hoped that this report had provided some reassurance especially with regard to the impact of the pandemic on transition programmes which had not been able to happen in person. Schools had worked very hard digitally to bridge that move from years 6 to 7 but it was not the same as being in the building.

Recommendations 1 and 2, as outlined within the report, were moved by Councillors Tudor Jones and Councillor Gladys Healey.

Councillor Tudor Jones suggested an amendment to recommendation 3 as outlined within the report. He suggested that the recommendation be amended to read "Members to reinforce the need for continued financial support from Welsh Government to further develop and secure the Council's services in relation to Elective Home Education".

Mrs. Lynne Bartlett suggested that recommendation 3 be amended to read "Members to reinforce the need for continued financial support from Welsh Government to further develop and secure the Council's services and resources in relation to Elective Home Education". Councillor Tudor Jones agreed to this amendment.

The third recommendations, as outlined above, was moved by Councillor Tudor Jones and seconded by Councillor Gladys Healey.

Councillor Dave Mackie proposed an additional recommendation that a letter be written to the WG to encourage the creation of a national register for children who were educated at home. This was seconded by Councillor Paul Cunningham.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee was assured about the Council's discharge of its duties in relation to Elective Home Education;
- (b) That the Committee acknowledged the challenges faced by the Education Welfare Team in fulfilling their statutory functions with rising numbers of EHE pupils in Flintshire;
- (c) That the Committee reinforce the need for continued financial support from Welsh Government to further develop and secure the Council's services and resources in relation to Elective Home Education; and
- (d) That a letter be written to the WG to encourage the creation of a national register for children who were educated at home.

27. THE IMPACT THE PANDEMIC HAS HAD ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The Chief Officer (Education & Youth) provided a verbal update on the three highest risks identified during the recent meeting of the Recovery Committee.

The Chief Officer provided an update on the risk around managing uncertainty and operational changes which may need to be implemented for the start of the new term. She advised that schools had been open for half a term and continued to face significant challenges in managing the impact of Covid-19 cases on pupils and staff. Changes to Welsh Government (WG) to allow learners to remain in school, even if they were in contact with a positive case had resulted in high numbers of infections within both the pupil and staff population. The very limited availability of supply staff for a range of school posts was stretching schools' operational capacity and keeping anxiety levels amongst staff and school leaders at an elevated level. Changes to guidance for Specialist Schools has been particularly problematic. Guidance for the TTP process has also been recently reviewed and updated with a view to streamline information sharing and reduce workload for both TTP and schools but this was only just being introduced so it was too early to assess impact. The Education Portfolio, Environmental Health Officers and the TTP team continue to provide high levels of support to schools, however, the resilience of school leaders was stretched and the ongoing risk of disrupted education for learners remained high.

Councillor Dave Mackie raised concerns around the difficulties in recruitment of supply school staff and referred to a recent television programme which had highlighted this as a national problem. The Chief Officer agreed that this was challenging and not only included teachers but classroom assistances, caretakers, cleaners and other staff too. All schools had been impacted by this and it was not something the authority could solve. With regard to the RRRS funding she confirmed that schools had had this for some time now and felt confident that if schools had secured those staff members then this additional funding would enable the continuation of the contracts. The Chief Officer also reported that WG had identified a cohort of newly qualified teachers (NQT) who had not had sufficient school experience. WG had funded 20 NQTs to gain experience in schools to achieve their qualified teacher status and also provide that extra support in schools. It had been advised that this funding was likely to be extended to the spring term which would enable schools to keep their NQTs. Hopefully this may mitigate some of the challenges and it was pleasing to see that the WG recognised the success of the programme and support this was providing to schools.

The Chief Officer provided a verbal update on the risk around the impact the pandemic has had on children and young people. She explained that regular contact was maintained with schools and that she had recently met with the secondary and primary Head Teachers Federations to enable a better understanding of the pressures being faced by schools. Feedback from schools was that many learners were clearly evidencing the impact of having missed long periods of teaching. This was reflected in their knowledge, skills and concentration but also in their behaviour. Schools were also reporting higher levels of pupils struggling to re-engage and that some were also having difficulty conforming to appropriate behaviour expectations whilst in school because of the

lack of structure for a long period of time. Schools reported that these behavioural challenges, which were an obvious exemplification of the impact of the pandemic on learners' emotional well-being, were taking a great deal of time to manage and resolve, and this coupled with staff absences, were adding to the current pressures.

The Chief Office also reported that the regional pilot for the national framework for Emotional Health and Wellbeing was now underway with a small number of Flintshire schools involved. Schools not in the pilot continue to be supported to use the effective materials in the Health Schools Scheme alongside other mental health strategies. This risk remained high.

The Senior Manager reported on the training provided around well-being with head teachers commenting positively on the quality of training provided to schools. She reported on the WG Well-being Grant which had increased the counselling capacity and also the training programmes delivered to schools on emotional literacy support. Work was ongoing with Social Services and CAMHS to support parents who were unable to cope with the young people because of their behaviours.

The Chief Officer reported on the service areas for the older teenage group who received support from the Youth Service and Youth Justice teams to assist with their challenging issues. She added a lot of the behaviour in schools was emanating from home or the community and it was important to look at all of the services that could support the young people and schools.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the verbal update be noted; and
- (b) That the Committee remained concerned on the pressure being put on Officers and Schools but supported and appreciated that the Chief Officer Team were doing everything in their power to manage the risk.

28 THE RESILIENCE OF SCHOOLS IN MANAGING A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF CHANGES

The Chief Officer (Education & Youth) provided a verbal update on the resilience of schools in managing a significant number of changes i.e. the new curriculum, Additional Learning Needs transformation and the introduction of Estyn school inspections.

The Chief Officer reported that this risk was a long term issue. Schools were being supported by the Education Portfolio and by the Regional School Improvement Service (GwE) to help them balance the demands of these significant changes, but feedback from Head Teachers was that balancing all the priorities whilst dealing with Covid cases and staff absences was hugely challenging. The reality of life in schools during the term had been regularly fed back at regional and national meetings and Headteachers had also recently shared their issues directly with the Minister for Education at a national conference. This risk remained high.

Councillor Dave Mackie spoke in support of the comments made by the Chief Officer. Whilst he felt that there were areas of concern which needed to be brought to the attention of Welsh Government (WG) given the current pressure being placed on schools with the Additional Learning Needs Act and the new Curriculum for Wales.

Councillor Paul Cunningham spoke in support of the comments made by Councillor Dave Mackie and commended the work of the officers on behalf of students to support them through their education. The Chief Officer thanked Councillors Dave Mackie and Paul Cunningham for their comments and said that it was a team effort together with the support of the improvement advisors in GwE who provided excellent support to schools and head teachers. She explained that she wrote to all head teachers at the end of each term to thank them for their efforts and said that she would include for the end of this coming term the comments of the Committee.

The Chairman thanked the Chief Officer and said that the comments of the Committee being included in the end of term email would be appropriate. He said that, apart from the challenges with Covid, the new Curriculum and Additional Learning Needs Act, they have had to deal with technological changes. How all staff had coped with all of the changes was greatly appreciated.

The Facilitator reported that feedback on consideration of the risks identified for the Committee would be provided to the next meeting of the Recovery Committee. She asked the Committee if they were assured following the verbal update from the Chief Officer that the risk was being managed.

Councillor Dave Mackie suggested that the feedback to the Recovery Committee be that “the Committee remained concerned on the pressure being put on Officers and Schools but supported and appreciated that the Chief Officer Team were doing everything in their power to manage the risk”.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the verbal update be noted; and
- (b) That the Committee remained concerned on the pressure being put on Officers and Schools but supported and appreciated that the Chief Officer Team were doing everything in their power to manage the risk.

29. 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 4.15 pm)

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Chairman