

EDUCATION, YOUTH & CULTURE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
21 MARCH 2024

Minutes of the hybrid meeting of the Education, Youth & Culture Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held on Thursday 21 March 2024.

PRESENT: Councillor Teresa Carberry (Chair)

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

SUBSTITUTIONS:

Councillor Debbie Owen (for Councillor David Richardson),

APOLOGIES: Councillor Arnold Woolley, Lynn Bartlett and Wendy White

CONTRIBUTORS:

Councillor Mared Eastwood (Cabinet Member for Education, Welsh Language, Culture and Leisure); Leader of the Council; Chief Executive; Chief Officer (Education & Youth);
The Regional Manager (Emergency Planning) (for agenda item 52)
Senior Manager (School Improvement) (for agenda item 53)

IN ATTENDANCE:

Overview & Scrutiny Facilitators and Democratic Services Officer

48 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

No declarations were received.

49. MINUTES

1 February 2024

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 February 2024 were approved, as moved and seconded by Councillors Dave Mackie and Gladys Healey.

Matters Arising

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In response to questions from Councillor Andrew Parkhurst on the future risks around the 'Unallocated Schools Budget.' The Chief Officer (Education & Youth) asked Councillor Parkhurst to e-mail her the questions following the meeting so that she could liaise with the Finance Manager and provide a response to all Committee Members.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 1 February 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

50. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME AND ACTION TRACKING

In presenting the report, the Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator outlined the items listed on the Forward Work Programme which were attached at Appendix 1. The Forward Work Programme would be updated to include the upcoming meeting dates following the Annual Meeting of County Council.

Presenting the Action Tracking report, the Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator confirmed that the action on recruitment and retention had been included on the Forward Work Programme of the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee. It was also highlighted that the Saltney & Broughton Area Review and Theatr Clwyd actions were included under items to be scheduled. The letter from the Chair thanking Headteachers had been circulated by email and it was confirmed that the action relating to the Council Plan had been completed with the Chief Officer (Education and Youth) circulating an email to all staff thanking them for their hard work in achieving the key priority targets. All actions were now completed.

The Chair requested that a report from NEWydd in relation to School Meals be added to the Forward Work Programme. Following a request from Councillor Dave Mackie that feedback from schools/pupils be included in the report, the Chief Officer suggested that Steve Jones and Claire Sinnott work jointly on a report to capture pupil engagement with NEWydd around School Meals.

Councillor Mackie asked that a report on School Improvement in relation to GwE, specifically around the funding of the organisation and proposals going forward be added to the Forward Work Programme. The Chief Officer welcomed this and suggested that a report detailing the implications of the changes, financial impacts and the expectations on Local Authorities to make different arrangements be presented to the Committee at the meeting in May.

The Chief Officer suggested that a report on the Youth Justice Service Inspection be added to the Forward Work Programme for the September meeting.

Councillor Andrew Parkhurst asked if the report to the Joint Scrutiny Committee in June on Additional Learning Needs would include information on the provision of education for children with Autism. The Chief Officer said that within the report there would be specific reference to specialist education and what was being done to meet this growing demand.

In response to a question from Councillor Parkhurst on the School Reserves report the Chief Officer commented that schools had to submit their budgets to the Council by 30 June and that there were a number of processes taking place currently around the restructure of the workforce. It was felt that this

would not be ready prior to the summer holidays and that September was the best time to bring this to the Committee.

The recommendations, as outlined within the report, were moved by Councillor Gladys Healey and seconded by Councillor Carolyn Preece

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.

51. EMERGENCY PLANNING ARRANGEMENTS

The Chief Executive introduced the report and confirmed that it included information on the incident relating to a burst water main and the wider Emergency Planning Service as requested by the Committee at a previous meeting.

The Regional Manager for Emergency Planning provided background information on the formation and function of Emergency Planning in Flintshire. This included the statutory responsibilities under legislation and the role of the Chief Executive on the North Wales Council's Regional Emergency Planning Service (NWC-REPS).

A presentation was provided which included detail on the following slides:-

- Why we have Emergency Planning
- The Civic Contingencies Act 2004
- Other Legislation
- Definition of Emergency and Major Incidents
- What can cause emergencies?
- What is the North Wales Councils Regional Emergency Planning Service
- Emergency Planning Structure in FCC
- Recent Emergencies in Flintshire and North Wales
- Local Resilience Forum Structure
- Covid Response
- Debriefing
- Main risks in North Wales
- Elected Members E-Learning

Councillor Dave Mackie referred to the flooding issue he was involved with and asked if Members could be provided with a contact number for a person who would be able to guide the school on whether to close or not.

The Chief Executive referred to point 1.03 of the report and to the debrief saying Welsh Water should have had an escalation plan in place which would have alerted the Emergency Planning Team who would have co-ordinated the contact points. This did not happen. Following the learning on this and establishment of the test plan this should ensure that the plan was enacted in future. The Regional Manager confirmed that she had worked with emergency planning counterparts within Welsh Water to ensure the plan was in place so that the team were informed in future. She reassured Members that if they were alerted to any incident and were unsure of who to contact then they could contact her team for advice.

In response to questions from Councillor Andrew Parkhurst around funding, the Chief Executive commented that previously each Local Authority had its own team and that as part of the regional approach to rationalise and create consistency it was brought together with the team dealing with issues more effectively. The Regional Manager explained the funding was allocated on a population base percentage. The funding was allocated to cover staffing costs, training for local authority staff and the production of e-Learning and performance management reports. The team also attended six scrutiny committee meetings for each local authority with the Annual Report presented to the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee. The team worked with the Information Management Team to discuss topics for learning and looked at the Debrief from the Manchester Arena attack specifically around the role of Members. A Members handbook was being produced which would outline the responsibilities for Members, Leaders and Heads of Service to ensure that the correct messages were sent out to the public. Once this had been reviewed it would be circulated to Members. It was explained that after every incident, even if not in Flintshire, the learning was reviewed and looked at to understand how this would look in North Wales to ensure that the authorities responded correctly.

Councillor Ryan McKeown referred to Councillor Parkhurst's comment on the bus incident saying that it related to when one of the operators withdrew their service and reinstated it shortly afterwards. The Leader of the Council explained this related to a majority provider who announced on a Friday they were not providing that service on the following Monday. The Chief Executive and Chief Officers held discussions with the operator which resulted in the operator reinstating the provision.

Councillor McKeown requested further information on the decision to close all schools across Flintshire when the amber snow warning was given. He sought clarification on how that decision was made and asked could the minutes of that meeting be shared with Members. In response, the Chief Executive explained that the decision-making framework was included within the presentation. The Council's Emergency Management Response Team, based on detailed information from the MET office and other sources, analysed that information and following discussions with the Leader of the Council made that decision. It was confirmed that the notes from this meeting could be shared. The Leader commented that the recommendation was provided to Head Teachers to close schools on their individual weather circumstances, which also had to include their staff travelling to school from other areas where there was more snow.

Councillor Healey asked if there were enough ambulances in the event of a major incident. In response, the Regional Manager confirmed that every Ambulance Service had a reciprocal arrangement with North Wales able to contact Cheshire and Shropshire. If there was an incident then the region would call on resources from other areas to ensure that we were adequately able to respond. The Leader of the Council also confirmed that that reciprocal arrangement applied to the Fire and Police Authorities too.

The Leader of the Council referred to the difficult decisions made during the Covid response across the whole of North Wales which was led by the Police and included all Chief Executives and Leaders. The Leader then referred to a major incident that he was involved with at Bollingbrook Heights and said that following a discussion with the Chief Executive on what he could do to help, it was agreed that he would be briefed on what was happening and asked to speak to the press. He felt that Members had a supporting role given his experience with Covid and other incidents.

Councillor Paul Cunningham agreed that Members should stay out of the way, but the Leader had highlighted where Members could be useful. He referred to his previous career as a fire fighter and felt that the most important thing following an incident was the debrief. He commented that Flintshire was lucky to have such a wonderful Emergency Planning Team.

The Chief Officer (Education & Youth) reported that she chaired the Emergency Information Team as part of the EMRT Structure which had looked at communication and how Members were supported. The Member's Handbook was in the process of being reviewed and would be circulated as soon as possible with Members also encouraged to undertake the E-learning which the team provided. The Chief Officer reassured the Committee that schools had a Managing School Emergencies Policy in place and she outlined what was covered within this document. Schools also had the support of the portfolio when dealing with an emergency. It was agreed that the reviewed Members Handbook and the link to E-Learning be circulated to all Members via the Democratic Services Manager when it was finalised.

The recommendations, as outlined within the report, were moved by Councillor Jason Shallcross and seconded by Councillor Dave Mackie

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report together with the response from Welsh Water and the wider work of the regional service be noted; and
- (b) That the Committee thank Helen Kilgannon, Regional Manager for Emergency Planning for the report and presentation provided at the meeting.

52. TACKLING THE IMPACT OF INEQUALITY ON EDUCATION OUTCOMES

In presenting the report the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) explained that this report was being presented following a request from the Committee. It included an update on the work which was being undertaken to support schools to minimise the impact of poverty on learners who were in more disadvantageous circumstances.

The Senior Manager for School Improvement referred to the previous report presented to Committee in May 2023 which outlined the research and national challenges around tackling the impact of poverty and disadvantage. An update had been requested by Members on the actions and progress and this report highlighted the key aspects. Section 1.01 referred to the focus on poverty, a thread which ran through the strategic improvement priorities within the Council Plan. Section 1.02 outlined the previous performance data on the national and local outcomes with Sections 1.03 to 1.06 referring to the focus on three priorities within the Corporate Plan. The Authority was successful in bringing all secondary schools into the pilot for free school meals for year 7 pupils, the nationally funded pilot which ended in July 2023. Praise was given to the network of school uniform exchanges which existed across the County and the mapping exercise which had been led by colleagues in the Revenue and Benefits team. Section 1.06 referred to the food and fun programme which had been delivered for the last 5 years and took place during the summer holidays with 300 children participating last year. Section 1.07 included an update on how schools were utilizing the resources from the Children's Commissioner and the "Check with Ceri" resource and also included feedback from schools. Section 1.08 highlighted how schools were making use of the Pupil Development Grant (PDG) funding with examples included from recent Estyn Inspection reports. Section 1.09 of the report referred to the community focused schools' projects with Welsh Government grant funding used to target areas where it was most needed. Section 1.10 outlined the work with central services within the portfolio providing on-going advice to families to enable them to access appropriate benefits and services to which they were entitled.

The Chair was delighted to see how many initiatives which schools had implemented for the benefit of the students. The Chair also reminded the Committee that a letter had been sent to all schools, on behalf of the Committee, encouraging the use of the Pupil Development Grant.

Councillor Dave Mackie referred to his recent visit to the Westwood Centre to receive a presentation by Gail Bennett in Children's Services on the way a child's brain developed. The point was made that if a child received the right stimulation at the right age their brain developed in a positive way, if this did not happen then the number of connections within the brain reduced. It was so difficult to change the situation that these children found themselves in, to change those connections, and it was important that parents understood this.

In response to questions from Councillor Mackie on the gap in GCSE results between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils in England and Wales, the Senior Manager commented that she had not had a chance to fully study the report by Luke Sibeta, published by the Institute of Fiscal Studies as only released today. She confirmed that this would feed into the portfolio's work moving forward.

Responding to questions from Councillor Mackie, the Senior Manager provided clarification on the lack of comparable data for A 'Level students and the successful Welsh Government pilot which had enabled the provision of a healthy and nutritious breakfast. Responses were also provided in relation to the Fun and Food Programme, especially the provision of hot meals and the support of school staff together with the School Uniform Exchange Programme.

The Leader of the Council reported on his visits with the Chief Officer to St David's in Saltney, Ysgol Trefynnnon in Holywell, Connah's Quay High School and Ysgol Maes Glas in Greenfield. He also referred to the visit to Ysgol Bryn Garth, fun in the forest. These were excellent schemes, and the Council was extremely grateful to the staff and school staff who supported them. These events were a lot of fun for children and parents.

The Chief Officer added that she and Councillor Mared Eastwood visited Flint on one of the days when parents were invited to attend. The parents said how important it was for their children and how much they appreciated the scheme, especially the opportunity to take food home. The number of schools taking this on had grown every year and this was an important strategy with funding from the WLGA and the commitment from support and teaching staff, AURA, the Health Board and the team running the activities.

Following a suggestion from the Leader of the Council it was agreed that Members of the Committee be invited to the Food and Fun Programme 2024 sessions to speak to learners and families to better understand the positive impact. The Chief Officer commented that she would be delighted if Members of the Committee came along to visit on the food and fun explorations next summer. The dates would be shared with the Committee.

In response to questions from Councillor Andrew Parkhurst, the Senior Manager provided clarification on the education attainment gap which had been worsened with Covid, the registration for Free School Meals which led to funding from the Pupil Development Grant and the link with Learner's destinations. Information was also provided on Post 16 provision and the SEREN Programme for students to apply to the Russell Group universities and other universities which extended to year 9 and above to get those conversations started earlier in schools. The Senior Manager confirmed she was part of the Regional Skills Partnership Board for North Wales which endeavoured to develop better connections with employers and schools. It was explained that the Chair of the Board would be attending the Secondary Head Teachers Meeting in May to outline what was on offer. The Adult Learning and Post 16 Advisor was looking at work around apprenticeships to ensure that information was circulated to schools. Information was also provided on the Adult Learning Opportunities.

The Chief Officer referred to Councillor Parkhurst's question on school attendance saying that this was a priority for the portfolio and that an annual update was provided to Committee on this. She reassured Members that the Inclusion Service were constantly refining the approach to ensure all learners were in school. Small positive steps were being made since Covid, but this was a constant battle to ensure young people returned and stayed in school.

Following questions around Free School Meals, the Facilitator referred to a letter recently written by the Chair of the Community & Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee on what work was being done by Welsh Government, on a national level, to publicise and encourage the take up of Free School Meals. A response had been received from the Minister for Education and Welsh Language and it was agreed that a copy of the letter and response be circulated to the Committee following the meeting.

Councillor Bill Crease agreed with the comments made by Councillors Mackie and Parkhurst and felt the first 3 or 4 years of a child's life were so important with huge implications on the outcomes for young people and resources required to try and rectify this. It was essential that a method and mechanisms were found to help the Covid co-hort to challenge, develop and improve the situation for these young people.

The Senior Manager explained that there were huge challenges, but the biggest impact was the quality of education, teaching and learning that young people received. Early Years education was so important, and she paid tribute to the schools and the work that they were doing to help young people to catch up and to provide positive encouragement and reinforcement. These pupils were responding really well, albeit with challenges, and the focus was on the quality of teaching and learning which would help a young person to move out into the world of work and use their skills to transfer to jobs.

The Chief Officer commented that as an early years practitioner she agreed with Councillor Crease. Colleagues in primary schools were describing what the very youngest children coming into primary were presenting with and the level of support they needed. The support provided by Gail Bennett and the Flying Start Programme to 2-year-olds, children could access the funded education for 3-year-old with guidance provided to playgroups to provide that quality early years provision. It was explained that Welsh Government (WG) had published their new plan for ages 0 – 5 years “The Early Childhood Play Learning and Care Plan in Wales (High Level Plan)” and an overview of the focus for this plan was given. It was agreed that this document would be circulated to Members of the Committee following the meeting.

Councillor Debbie Owen sought clarification around the breakfast club and asked if schools organised this themselves. In response, the Senior Manager commented that some schools had their own clubs, with others receiving funding. The Chief Officer added that Welsh Government (WG) had made provision for primary breakfast, but that this had become a childcare provision for parents. Some schools just offered breakfast for 30 minutes prior to the start of the day.

Councillor Debbie Owen referred to Quay Play and asked if it was possible to work together. The Chief Officer commented that these were two distinct programmes with the Food and Fun running for 4 days over that 3-week period. The Quay Play was a successful part of the school holiday play provision, but Welsh Government (WG) had confirmed that it was not possible to have a situation of double funding. It was not possible to use the Play Opportunities Grant for the provision of food but last year play schemes were able to offer snack provision where there was an identified need.

The Leader of the Council praised the Chair for the work that she had undertaken in relation to the uniform exchange scheme. He referred to Free School Meals saying that parents were required to register to obtain not only Free School Meals but also the School Uniform Grant. He added that the Chief Officer and himself had spent a significant amount of time speaking up for younger children to access education with the issues of behaviours and socialising of these children lingering within the education system. The Leader felt that encouraging students to get the appropriate provision such as apprenticeships which could lead to quality lifelong jobs was important. University was not for everyone with families fearing the build-up of debt which was key to this.

Councillor McKeown commented that he had been a Flintshire school pupil and a recipient of Free School Meals and Uniform Grant. He had attended university but said that university was not for everyone, and apprenticeships should be encouraged. When he was in school the focus was on university when apprenticeships at Airbus could have provided an excellent career. He was pleased to see the focus on community focused schools.

Councillor Jason Shallcross referred to the importance of parental influence and through his experience as a governor had witnessed a lack of expectation and aspiration. He felt there was a lack of encouragement from home and questioned how this could be changed.

Councillor Gina Maddison referred to the “charter for change” and asked if High Schools practiced period poverty. In response, the Senior Manager confirmed that there was a Period Poverty Grant Scheme which was well-supported in schools and managed by the Healthy Schools Team. The team worked with schools and communities through Youth Services and Adult Learning provision circulating free products and educational information on those products. The Chief Officer referred to the promotional campaign currently taking place along with the subscription service which ensured that all young people had the items delivered discreetly to their homes with information provided around the products which were available. The Scheme ensured that everyone who needed these products received them which included workshops with parents. It was suggested that an update report on ‘Period Poverty’ be added to the list of items of the Joint Scrutiny meeting scheduled for 27th June 2024.

In response to questions from Councillor Preece on the roll out for Free School Meals, the Chief Officer confirmed that the Council was on track with the roll out for Years 5 – 6 commencing after Easter and she thanked NEWydd and schools for this last phase of the project. Referring to the menu and portion sizes the Chief Officer suggested that these questions be put to the Managing Director when he attended a meeting of the Committee.

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

RESOLVED:

That that Committee confirms that it had received a continued level of assurance regarding the work of the Education & Youth Portfolio in supporting schools to tackle the impact of poverty and disadvantage on their learners.

53. 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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Chair