

EDUCATION AND YOUTH OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
15 JUNE 2015

Minutes of the meeting of the Education and Youth Overview & Scrutiny Committee of the Flintshire County Council held at County Hall, Mold on Monday, 15 June 2015

PRESENT:

Councillors: Marion Bateman, Paul Cunningham, Peter Curtis, Andy Dunbobbin, David Healey, Dave Mackie, Nancy Matthews, Vicky Perfect, Ian Roberts, Nigel Steele-Mortimer and Carolyn Thomas

CO-OPTED MEMBERS:

David Hýtch

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillor Glyn Banks attended as Local Member and Councillor Veronica Gay attended as an observer

APOLOGIES:

Councillors: Ray Hughes and Colin Legg
Janine Beggan, Rebecca Stark and Reverend John Thelwell

CONTRIBUTORS:

Cabinet Member for Education, Chief Officer (Education and Youth) and Programme Co-ordinator – School Modernisation

IN ATTENDANCE:

Education and Youth Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator and Committee Officer

1. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN

The Education and Youth Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator advised that the post of Chair of this Committee was allocated to the Labour Group at the Annual meeting of the Council and notification had been received that Councillor Ian Roberts had been appointed as Chairman.

Councillor Ian Roberts took the Chairman for the remainder of the meeting.

RESOLVED:

That Councillor Ian Roberts be appointed as Chairman of the Committee.

2. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIRMAN

The Chairman sought nominations for the appointment of Vice-Chairman for the Committee. Councillor Paul Cunningham nominated Mr. David Hýtch and this was duly seconded.

RESOLVED:

That Mr. David Hýtch be appointed as Vice-Chairman for the Committee.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Vicky Perfect declared a personal interest as she was a School Governor at Ysgol Maes Edwin.

Councillor Nancy Matthews declared a personal interest as she was a School Governor at Nercwys School.

The Chair suggested that Members only needed to declare an interest if they were School Governors of the three schools mentioned in the report before the Committee at this meeting.

4. TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE COMMITTEE

The Education and Youth Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator advised that a new Overview & Scrutiny structure had been agreed at the Annual Council Meeting in May 2015 and therefore the Terms of Reference of each of the Committees had been reviewed.

The Committee was now responsible solely for education and youth service issues and issues such as Leisure Services and Libraries were now within the remit of the Organisational Change Overview & Scrutiny Committee. Previously there were issues where the five statutory co-optees could speak but not vote, as their co-option related to education issues but they were now able to vote on all of the items which were within the remit of the Committee.

The Chairman expressed his significant disappointment at the loss of libraries and leisure strategy from the terms of reference for this Committee, particularly as a number of leisure centres were located within schools. Councillor Carolyn Thomas and Councillor Peter Curtis concurred and referred in particular to the leisure centre and school in Holywell.

In response, the Education & Youth Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator advised that she would feed the comments back to the Member Engagement Manager and request that any items that related to schools and leisure centres be considered by both this and the Organisational Change Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Nigel Steele-Mortimer suggested that the recommendation should be changed to read:-

‘That the Committee deplore the removal of libraries and leisure services from the remit of the Education and Youth Overview & Scrutiny Committee’.

This was duly seconded by Councillor Nancy Matthews. Councillor Thomas indicated that there were five Members who were on both Committees.

The Chairman referred to the link with libraries and continuing school provision and added that the Committee expected to be kept fully informed about dual use leisure centres because of the potential impact on schools.

On being put to the vote, the recommendation was carried unanimously.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee deplore the removal of libraries and leisure services from the remit of the Education and Youth Overview & Scrutiny Committee; and
- (b) That the Committee be fully informed of any future issues arising around dual use leisure centres where there would be an impact on schools.

5. SCHOOL MODERNISATION REVIEWS

The Chief Officer (Education & Youth) introduced the report to update Members on the progress made with School Modernisation.

He provided a detailed presentation which covered the following areas:-

- School Organisation
- Longstanding Principles
- Budget Context and principles
- Current Budget
- Big Budget Conversation – Summary
- Further work for 2016
- Changing Context
- School Modernisation
- Trigger Points for Review
- Implementation Process
- Schools Modernisation Funding
- Implementation Plan

The Cabinet Member for Education spoke of the difficult position that the Council was in due to the severe austerity programme and to maintain the status quo was not an option. He commented on the further cuts that were expected due to reductions in funding and of the need to ensure that the funding received was spent appropriately. He felt that the proposals would not be a surprise to the schools concerned or to Members as the School Modernisation Strategy that included the triggers that were included in this report had been considered by Cabinet in January 2015. The schools that

had been suggested all met some of the criteria for review. The Cabinet Member said that it was incumbent on Members of Cabinet to make the decision to commence informal consultation. A target of a maximum of 10% surplus places had been set by Welsh Government and it was expected that Councils achieved this target. He said that unfilled places had been an issue for a number of years and that there was a need to tackle the problem.

Councillor Nancy Matthews said that there was no mention in the report of places for the displaced pupils and indicated that she had been advised that there were an insufficient number of places available. She queried whether transport would be provided for the pupils who would need to attend a new school. The Chief Officer had earlier spoken of neighbouring schools and Councillor Matthews queried what the distance between schools would need to be to class them as neighbours. She spoke of school monitoring and asked about schools where leadership was a concern. She said that the admissions policy should also be called into question and added that a school was the heart of a community regardless of the building that housed it.

The Chief Officer (Education & Youth) said that the impact of change on the community was very much to the front of the minds of the decision makers. On the issue of available alternative places, he advised that Cabinet would not be asked to authorise the review if there were not sufficient surplus places in neighbouring schools; this issue would be raised during the consultation period. Transport would be provided in line with the Council's policy and there was an expectation that for primary school pupils it would generally be for those who lived more than two miles from the school and for secondary school pupils it would be for those that lived more than three miles from the school. The Admissions Policy was reviewed annually and the Chief Officer referred to one school mentioned in the report where 83% of the pupils were not attending their nearest school. He added that if schools had spare places then parents had the right to choose those place and therefore the issue was more about school organisation rather than admissions protocol.

The Programme Co-ordinator – School Modernisation said that an impact assessment on the community, transport, language and property issues would all be undertaken and would form part of the consultation report to Cabinet with the officer's recommendation. The proposals all met with Welsh Government (WG) and Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) guidance. On geographical areas and transportation to schools, the guidance indicated that there was a limit on the distance children could travel to school and this was 45 minutes by car.

On the issue of the admissions policy, the Cabinet Member spoke of the impact on local schools of parental choice to choose a school which had surplus places but was not their nearest school.

In response to comments from the Chair and Councillor Matthews, the Chief Officer indicated that, in line with the statutory School Organisation Code, the effect on communities would form part of the consultation document to Cabinet.

Councillor David Healey queried whether there had previously been reference to the three schools named in the report to Cabinet. He expressed significant concern that he had been made aware of the details in the local press prior to him receiving a copy of the agenda and that was the first time that he had known the details of the schools concerned. He also expressed concern that the Cabinet Member had indicated that the report did not contain any surprises.

In response, the Chief Officer said that there were protocols in place and briefings had been held for local Councillors in the wards where the schools were located and for headteachers, teachers and trade unions. The agenda and report had been released to all Councillors and the media at the appropriate time. The Cabinet Member advised that he had indicated that there were no surprises in the report as the School Modernisation Strategy was in place which included the necessary triggers. The schools had not been specifically named but the School Modernisation Policy had been in the public domain for some time. Councillor Healey expressed his annoyance as he believed that Members should have had longer to be consulted prior to the report being considered by Cabinet. The Chief Officer reiterated his earlier comments that all protocols had been followed, including the despatch of agendas to the Committee.

Councillor Paul Cunningham spoke of Ysgol Maes Edwin and queried whether further investment in the school would help to achieve better standards. He asked for details of the percentage of unfilled places at other schools in Flint and spoke of the levels of educational attainment. He also queried whether an application had been received for change of use for land behind the school. The Chief Officer responded that he was not aware of such an application but explained that discussions in relation to school sites were only entered into when land was vacant and therefore it was premature to have those discussions. The Chairman queried whether the land was green barrier and indicated that it may have been previously proposed for use as football pitches. Councillor Vicky Perfect believed that there was a covenant on the site which prevented anything other than a school being built on it.

On the issue of Ysgol Maes Edwin, the Chief Officer explained that the school met the criteria for review. The Programme Co-ordinator provided the following details on the number of surplus places:-

- Ysgol Gwynedd – 113 places
- Northop – 38 places
- Cornist – 14 spaces but some year groups were full
- There was also surplus capacity in Sychdyn and Northop Hall

Councillor Perfect agreed with the comments of Councillor Matthews and said that it would be unfair for children to travel from one end of the county to the other. She disputed the 14 places in Cornist school and said that Ysgol Maes Edwin only had two places available. She queried which schools the children from the 600 homes that were being developed at Croes

Atti would attend and whether there was an appropriate level of school places for future demand.

Mr. Hýtch noted that the key driver for the decisions was parental choice and commented that this was unsustainable and was out of the control of Members and officers. He spoke of the impact on the environment particularly in relation to increases in carbon dioxide omissions due to the provision of transport for the pupils to their new schools if their current school was closed. He commented on Welsh Medium schools and raised concerns that education in the Welsh Language would diminish if the proposals went ahead. He felt that there was an urgent need for consultation with the Welsh Forum too. He did not dispute the triggers identified in the report and recognised that reaching the triggers required a review of the proposed schools.

Councillor Marion Bateman asked about the surplus places in the three named schools and asked whether 10% surplus places had been for over three successive years. She also referred to the possible school closures which she felt would be disastrous for the communities concerned.

On the issue of Welsh Language, the Chief Officer said that Welsh Medium education had been expanded in part of the county and added that the school in Shotton met the identified need. There was a large level of surplus places in the north of the county and there was suitable alternative provision at Ysgol Gwenffrwd and in Prestatyn. He added that work would be undertaken with colleagues on the Welsh Education Strategic Partnership to look at options including co-working across the county border.

In response to Councillor Bateman, the Programme Co-ordinator confirmed that Ysgol Maes Edwin had 10% surplus places for over three years and therefore met one of the factors to trigger a review. The number of pupils at the school had increased but a large number of pupils were from other communities. In total there were over 4,000 surplus places in primary and secondary school portfolios across Flintshire.

Councillor Carolyn Thomas indicated that surplus places in schools had been an issue for some time and that repairs and maintenance was also a cause for concern. She said that there were too many schools with a high number of surplus places and funding of these could not continue. In response to Councillor Healey, she added that the names of the three schools proposed in the review were not known until recently. Councillor Thomas queried whether the figure set by WG of 10% surplus places was realistic and suggested that between 15% and 25% was a more appropriate figure due to the amount of housing development taking place. She suggested that there was a need to consider planning issues before going ahead with the proposals. She asked about the average cost per pupil and the lowest cost per pupil and queried whether there were enough children living in the localities to allow the schools to be sustainable if the allocations policy was changed. She felt that there was a need to provide more affordable housing for purchase and rent to ensure that areas were sustainable.

The Chief Officer provided assurance that Cabinet would not be asked to implement the proposals unless it was clear that there were good quality school places available in the area. The 10% maximum for surplus places was in line with WG guidance to ensure that parental preference was meaningful. He advised that he would circulate the figures for the average costs per pupil for schools.

The Cabinet Member concurred with the comments of Councillor Thomas about the need for growth in smaller villages to allow them to be sustainable.

Councillor Nigel Steele-Mortimer endorsed the comments of Councillor Matthews about the impact of school closures on smaller communities. He spoke of the proposals on the future of seven small schools within the county and commented on two small schools within his own ward which had fewer than 105 places and could therefore not be considered to be safe. He suggested that parents would move their children from schools which were proposed for review as they wanted certainty about school places. He commented on the Rhes-y-cae school where the numbers of pupils reduced to four when the closure of that school was considered. Because of the expected announcement by WG on the reorganisation of local authorities, he felt that it was premature for this Committee to consider a review of the schools and for Cabinet to take a decision on these schools. He felt that it was more appropriate to wait until the details of the reorganisation were known to allow engagement with other authorities to look at overall provision of education. He suggested an amendment to the recommendation that 'This Committee rejects proposals to put the seven schools out for review and ask Cabinet to wait for the outcome of the local government announcement following which an overall review of education in the new authority area can be undertaken'. This was duly seconded by Councillor Healey.

Councillor Peter Curtis said that the cuts to funding could not be held up to await for the details of a local government reorganisation. He felt that to introduce statistics and targets for schools would set one school off against another and suggested that questions should be asked why 83% of pupils that attended Ysgol Maes Edwin were not from the local area. He added that parental choice had made the sustainability of smaller local schools difficult and reiterated earlier comments that the status quo was not an option.

In response to a question from Councillor Andy Dunbobbin on whether deprivation areas were a contributing factor to schools staying open, the Chief Officer explained that information based on how well schools performed looked at outcomes for learners on free school meals. Councillor Dunbobbin also asked why John Summers High School was included in the statutory consultation. The Chief Officer responded that it was not one of the three schools that Cabinet were being asked to review. He referred to the earlier consultation paper on John Summers High School which included details of demography and information on how well free school meals pupils did when compared to neighbouring schools.

The Cabinet Member said that the local government reorganisation would not be implemented until at least 2021 and on the issue of Welsh Medium schools, he indicated that there were spare places in Prestatyn. He commented on the financing of educational provision which was diminishing and said that it could either be wasted on resourcing surplus places or spent on front line teaching. The timescale for the implementation of the proposals was between six and 18 months and reminded Members of the fact that the status quo could not continue.

The Chair invited Councillor Glyn Banks to speak on the report as the local Member for Ysgol Gwespyr Picton. Councillor Banks spoke about Welsh Language provision and the distance of eight miles to the school in Holywell and five miles to the school in Prestatyn from Ysgol Gwespyr Picton. He spoke of the expected rise in pupil numbers to 51 and suggested that parents would move their children to English medium schools and therefore the Welsh language would be lost. He did not feel that the financial case to close the school had been proven as details had not been provided of the extra cost for providing transportation to other schools or the environmental impact from carbon emissions. Councillor Banks commented on the 21st Century Schools programme and indicated that the school had not received any funding towards the maintenance of the building, which was in a good condition. He said that the same report would be submitted to Cabinet on 16 June 2015 as had been submitted to this meeting today and queried how the Welsh Language could be promoted if the school was to be closed.

In response, the Chief Officer explained that WG regarded the Welsh education scheme in the county positively. He commented on the expansion to provision in Shotton which would meet the unmet demand and he spoke of the partnership with URDD and the opportunity for the Eisteddfod to be held in Flint in 2016 which would help to promote the Welsh Language. He explained that the fact that there were significant surplus places could not be ignored and indicated that the report to Cabinet recognised that the triggers to commence a review had been reached and that it was important to commence consultation to find solutions to make education more resilient. Cabinet was being asked to commission the consultation and it was important that the community engaged with the consultation to allow any collaborative solutions to be identified.

Councillor David Healey welcomed the proposal by Councillor Steele-Mortimer to defer the reviews and raised significant concern that the names of the three schools had not been identified earlier in the process. He felt that the Committee should have been able to undertake research on the schools identified and he urged the Committee to express their concerns that Members were being advised of the schools at short notice which did not allow adequate consultation to take place. Councillor Healey spoke of the impact of austerity particularly for rural communities which he felt had not been taken into account.

In response, the Cabinet Member explained that the consultation process would commence following the Cabinet meeting if the

recommendation of officers was approved and added that the decision to close the schools had not been taken. He indicated that there was never a right time to undertake such a review and explained that the report was being submitted to this Committee before being considered by Cabinet to allow Members to make their comments known. A decision by Cabinet to implement the review would allow the informal consultation process to begin and he provided details of the timescales for the formal consultation. The Cabinet Member reminded Members that many local authorities were in the same position of reduced funding and needing to identify solutions of how best to use the monies available. He indicated that the policies had been in place for a number of years and there was a need to make progress and put the resources where they were needed.

Councillor Matthews asked about schools where leadership was unsatisfactory. Councillor Steele-Mortimer clarified his earlier comments that he was not expecting the reviews to be delayed until after local government reorganisation was in place but just until the details of the proposals from WG were known.

In commenting on the proposal to delay the review, the Chairman spoke of Flint High School sixth form proposals and the resulting decision to have separate sixth forms in Flint High School and St. Richard Gwyn High School, which were performing well. He spoke of the need to accept that there could be alternative models and of the comments made at the Schools Standards Monitoring Group that Headteachers were prepared to consider alternatives. He spoke of village schools and referred to the figure of 83% for the number of pupils for whom Ysgol Maes Edwin was not their local school. He concurred that questions should be asked about why this was the case and that this could form part of the consultation. He added that the decision to enter into consultation did not mean that a decision to close the schools had been made but would allow engagement with the community and alternative models to be considered.

Councillor Banks responded that 94% of children that attended Ysgol Gwespyr Picton were from the local area which was a significant achievement.

In responding to the comments made, the Chief Officer advised that a report back to Cabinet following the informal consultation would include details such as demography and learner outcomes and would be presented to this Committee for comment prior to being submitted to Cabinet for a decision on whether the proposals were a viable option.

The Chief Officer and Cabinet Member provided assurance that comments from this meeting would be submitted to the Cabinet meeting scheduled for the following day. The Cabinet Member reminded Members that not all of the schools had hit the same triggers and that some schools performed extremely well and were oversubscribed but added that a review was required if a school hit any of the triggers.

The Chairman sought clarification that if Cabinet approved the recommendations at its meeting the following day, informal consultation would commence which would be followed by formal consultation with the outcomes being submitted to this Committee for consideration and Cabinet for a decision. The Chief Officer confirmed that reports would be submitted to this Committee and Cabinet at each stage of the process.

Mr. Hýtch said that it was important for stakeholders and communities to be aware that starting consultation did not mean that the schools would close and requested that comments in the Press on the issue were appropriate. He sought clarification on whether educational provision could be provided cross border and in response, the Chief Officer confirmed this and added that he regularly met with colleagues in other authorities on the issue of school place planning and shared options for school organisational change.

Councillor Cunningham queried whether schools would be considered favourably if standards in schools improved during the consultation period. The Chief Officer indicated that all information including performance data would be reported to this Committee and Cabinet as part of the process to allow Cabinet to make an informed decision.

In referring to the table where the percentage of pupils that did not attend their nearest school was reported, Councillor Dave Mackie queried whether it was better that the figure was higher or lower. The Programme Co-ordinator advised that a higher figure was worse particularly as there were over 2,000 unfilled places in primary schools.

On being put to the vote, the proposal by Councillor Steele-Mortimer to defer the reviews was lost.

The Chairman suggested that the information in the report be noted and that the Committee note the assurance of the Cabinet Member and Chief Officer that views of the Committee would be outlined in full at the Cabinet meeting scheduled for 16th June 2015. This was duly seconded.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the information outlined in the report be noted; and
- (b) That the views of the Committee be outlined in full at the Cabinet meeting scheduled for 16th June 2015.

6. MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There were 2 members of the press in attendance.

(The meeting started at 2.00 pm and ended at 4.03 pm)

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Chairman