

EDUCATION, YOUTH & CULTURE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

18 MARCH 2021

Minutes of the virtual meeting of the Education, Youth & Culture Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held on Thursday 18th March 2021.

PRESENT: Mr David Hytch (Vice Chair in the Chair)

Councillors: Janet Axworthy, Sian Braun, Bob Connah, Paul Cunningham, Gladys Healey, Joe Johnson, Tudor Jones, Dave Mackie, Ian Smith, Martin White and David Williams

CO-OPTED MEMBERS:

Mrs Lynn Bartlett, Mrs Rebecca Stark and Ms Wendy White

SUBSTITUTIONS: Councillor Sean Bibby (for Councillor David Healey)

ALSO PRESENT: Councillors Patrick Heesom and Philippa Earlam (representative of the Standards Committee, attended as observers)

CONTRIBUTORS:

Councillor Ian Roberts, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Education; Chief Executive; Chief Officer (Education & Youth), Primary Learning Advisor; Chief Officer (Housing and Assets) and Strategic Finance Manager - Commercial and Housing (for agenda item 5) and John Grant, Senior Simon Budgen from Hawarden High School and Jim Connelly from Flint High School will be in attendance as observers for Agenda item 6. Learning Advisor – Engagement (for agenda item 9)

IN ATTENDANCE:

Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator, Democratic Services Officer and Democratic Services Support Officer

39. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

Councillors Bob Connah and Tudor Jones declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 5 – Community Asset Transfer Update. The Facilitator explained that Councillor Jones had received confirmation from the Monitoring Officer that the interest was personal and that he should not participate when voting for the recommendation relating to Holywell Leisure Centre within the report.

Councillors Paul Cunningham, Gladys Healey, Dave Mackie, Tudor Jones and Mr. David Hytch and Mrs. Rebecca Stark declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 6 – Update on Council Funding for Schools, as School Governors.

Councillor Gladys Healey declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 7 – Self-Evaluation Report on Education Services, as a School Governor at Castell Alun High School.

40. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 28 January 2021 were received.

The minutes were approved, as moved and seconded by Councillors Tudor Jones and Martin Wright.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

41. SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AND EXCLUSIONS

The Senior Learning Advisor (Engagement) introduced an overview of school attendance and exclusions for the year 2019/20, which had been impacted by the pandemic, as outlined within the report. He provided information on the trends for attendance, persistent absence and permanent and fixed term exclusions which had been highlighted by Estyn.

Councillor Dave Mackie commented on the table showing fixed term exclusions and asked what processes were in place to understand the causes of the increase in these figures and what steps were being taken to address them. In response, the Senior Learning Advisor provided information on the work carried out by the team, which was more proactive, working with children, families, head teachers and communities to better understand issues at an earlier stage.

The recommendations as outlined within the report were moved and seconded by Councillors Paul Cunningham and Dave Mackie.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the attendance data for Flintshire schools and the actions undertaken by officers to support engagement and safeguarding during the period of lockdown be noted; and
- (b) That the Committee recognise that the data provided had been impacted by COVID-19 lockdown and school closure.

42. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME AND ACTION TRACKING

The Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator presented the report confirming the next meeting of the Committee was the joint meeting with the Social & Health Care Overview & Scrutiny Committee scheduled for the 17th June. The next ordinary meeting of the Committee was scheduled to be held on the 1st July where the Annual Report from GwE, Social Media and internet Safety would be presented. All actions arising from previous meetings had been completed.

The Facilitator also reminded Members of the Out of County briefing sessions which had been arranged for all Members and co-opted Members for 22nd March.

The recommendations in the report were moved and seconded by Councillor Paul Cunningham and Mrs Lynne Bartlett.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Forward Work Programme be noted;
- (b) That the Facilitator, in consultation with the Chair of the Committee, be authorised to vary the Forward Work Programme between meetings, as the need arises; and
- (c) That the progress made in completing the outstanding actions be noted.

43. COMMUNITY ASSET TRANSFER UPDATE

The report was presented by the Chief Officer (Housing and Assets) and Strategic Finance Manager (Commercial and Housing) and provided an overview of the progress of the two largest Community Asset Transfers and how the pandemic had impacted them. Cambria Aquatics had transferred in 2016 with Holywell Leisure Centre commencing trading in 2017 and the Chief Officer provided detailed information on the benefits to the council, the substantial financial impact because of the pandemic together with precautionary steps taken to enable re-opening safely. He also provided information on the grant support schemes and furlough opportunities. He paid tribute to the management of these organisations which had very strong community support and felt confident that these would move forward beyond the pandemic.

Councillor Mackie commented on the unprecedented difficulties faced by the two organisations and suggested that the Committee write to them to praise the work of the managers and volunteers for the way in which they had dealt with them. The Facilitator agreed to send a letter on behalf of the Committee to both organisations.

The recommendations outlined within the report were taken separately. The first and second recommendations were moved and seconded by Councillor Martin White and Mrs. Rebecca Stark. The third recommendation was moved by Councillors Janet Axworthy and Gladys Healey. Councillor Tudor Jones did not take part in the vote on the third recommendation.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the progress of the Community Asset Transfers be noted;
- (b) That the Committee supported the continued grant support for Cambrian Aquatics into 2021/22; and
- (c) That the Committee support the continued grant support for Holywell Leisure Centre into 2021/22.

44. SELF-EVALUATION REPORT OF EDUCATION SERVICES

The Chief Officer (Education & Youth) presented the self-evaluation report and explained that, due to the pandemic, the information had not been structured in the usual way against the Estyn Framework for the inspection of Local Government

Education Services which had been temporarily suspended together with the key data collections from Welsh Government (WG). She referred to previous reports to meetings attended by GwE and Estyn colleagues with the Thematic Review of the Regional Services presented at the last meeting and attached to the report was the letter sent to Flintshire County Council from Estyn which summarised the positive assessment of the work undertaken in schools during this period. She also provided information on the next steps and priorities within the Council Plan.

The Chair said that the format of the report was very useful in providing information on all service areas. He invited questions on each of the service areas, as outlined in Appendix 1 of the report.

Inclusion and Progression Service

The Chair referred to page 54 the last paragraph and asked as this was now an online offer with no theoretical limit why the training was not available to everyone. In response the Chief Officer confirmed she would refer this to the Senior Manager (Inclusion and Progression) to provide a response.

Mrs Stark asked if provision had been considered for young person counselling and psychology services moving forward and were schools aware of pupils who may already require that support. In response the Chief Officer confirmed that this had been identified by the Children's Commissioner and that previously WG had provided additional funding for counselling services to support ALN services and that this would be a priority moving forward for them. There was a strong holistic recovery programme working with Health and CAMMS colleagues and Children's Services to enable a wraparound model to support these children and young people. She added that additional funding had been provided last year to support young people's emotional health and well-being.

Early Entitlement Service

The Chair asked for an explanation on what was covered by the Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme. In response, the Chief Officer explained that during the pandemic WG had suspended the childcare offer and created the Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme and that similar to schools who operated during the pandemic providing childcare for critical workers, WG provided funding for this service to provide the same support for critical workers. This was managed by the Childcare team within Social Services.

Mrs Stark asked if WG had anticipated the impact of the gap in education for young learners in their early years' education and would this be taken into account when measuring their performance. In response, the Chief Officer confirmed that this was being discussed and referred to the Foundation Phase Curriculum for 3 – 7 year olds which firstly looked at the child and their personal and social development and then provided support across different areas of learning. She confirmed the early years was front and centre of the National Recovery Programme and that she was involved in discussions to shape that work moving forward.

The Leader confirmed that, as the WLGA Education Spokesperson, he was pressing the needs of the Foundation Phase as this age group were least able to

access any form of online blended learning. He had been pleased to see WG decide that the Foundation Phase should be the first to return to school and that the missed opportunities felt by those children was a priority for WG who had provided significant resources into the programme Recruit, Recover and Raise Standards which would enable all young children and people to receive that assistance when they returned to school.

Councillor Paul Cunningham commented that the speech and language aspect to this was important to these young children to be able to express themselves. The Chief Officer said that not all children would be in deficit when it came to speech and language and that many children would have been supported by their parents during this time and benefited from that time as a family bubble. The Leader added that parents and carers were owed a debt of gratitude for their support with their children's education during this time and he looked forward to all children returning to school after Easter.

Integrated Youth Provision Service

The Chair referred to page 71 of the report and the reference to the Dedicated Youth Worker working a day a week at 5 Secondary Schools and asked was this the limit of the demand or did resources prevent the other schools being involved. In response, the Chief Officer confirmed it was a resource issue and that progress was being made working towards having a Youth Worker in every school but that this was reliant on the realignment and efficiencies of resources within the service.

Youth Justice Service and Flintshire Sorted

The Chair asked if amendments to the Exclusion Policy and Substance Misuse Policy had been made and if the issue up for review was the first offence of being caught with drugs resulting in permanent exclusion. In response, the Chief Officer explained the reasons for exclusion had been looked at with substance misuse and violent behaviour a part of that. The policy had to be re-visited regularly to enable schools to be robust in how they managed these offences and that sometimes these young people were victims in situations beyond their control and that the Youth Justice Service needed a more prominent role in schools.

Ms Wendy White asked if the zero tolerance regarding drug related offences in schools had also considered joint enterprise with people who were using or selling drugs. The Chief Officer agreed to speak to Mrs White outside of the meeting to discuss this suggestion further.

School Planning & Provision Service

The Chair referred to the PRU and asked if there were plans to use or dispose of the redundant assets there. In response, the Chief Officer confirmed these would be surplus from the portfolio and would then revert to the capital assets team.

The Chair commented that this was a substantial report and that the clear format was worth considering for future reports.

The recommendation outlined within the report were moved and seconded by Councillors Tudor Jones and Dave Mackie.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the report be noted; and
- (b) That the positive thematic report undertaken by Estyn on the work of education services in Flintshire to support children and young people during the pandemic be noted.

45. UPDATE ON COUNCIL FUNDING FOR SCHOOLS

The Chief Executive introduced a report to outline to the Committee the proposal for distributing the additional £1m allocated to secondary schools in the 2021/22 budget. Because of the timing and purpose of the funding, the Council will allocate the funding in 2021/22 as a supplementary allocation.

The Estyn inspection of the Local Authority in 2019 raised concerns about the long term nature of deficit budgets in certain secondary schools, and as part of their inspection report, a key recommendation was that the Authority took steps to address the deficits. The additional funding in the budget was primarily to provide additional resource to those schools in financial difficulty.

The Chief Executive explained that there had been no funding solution available to deal with the deficits, but by working hard to set the 2021/22 budget, together with investigating the opportunities within the Welsh Government (WG) WG settlement to realign additional funding to Schools, a solution had been reached to provide additional funding to secondary schools. Explaining the way in which the funding had been allocated, he commented on the concerns which had been received by some Headteachers and School Governors. He advised that it was acknowledged by the Authority that in recent years secondary schools in general had experienced pressure on budget, and therefore, a proportion of the funding would go to those schools which had not met the principles, as set out in the report.

The Leader of the Council spoke in support of the comments made by the Chief Executive and advised that the proposed additional funding had been fully supported by the County Council. He commented on the challenging position schools had faced due to austerity but said that young people across Flintshire had the right to access a broad and balanced curriculum.

The Chief Officer (Education and Youth) added that young people in schools across Flintshire should not suffer because of a variety of very complex factors which had led to the deficits being accrued. She provided a detailed explanation of the allocation principles, as outlined within the report, which had included deprivation factors. Additional funding was also being provided to school from WG which would continue for the next financial year. Whilst this was welcomed, she commented on the importance of the Council maximising its Council budget to assist in addressing school deficits.

The Chair invited Mr. Jim Connelly, Head of Flint High School, who was in attendance, to comment on the proposal.

Mr Jim Connelly thanked the Chair for the opportunity to attend the meeting and address the Committee. He welcomed the comments made by the Chief Executive, Leader and Chief Officer, which he said had provided some rationale behind the proposal and said that had the Secondary Heads Federation received this information beforehand it would have alleviated some of the concerns. He asked that the consultation process be improved in the future and commented on the difficult decisions which had been made by all schools across Flintshire, due to austerity and a reduction in school budgets. He said that he fully understood that the Council had tried to provide schools across Flintshire with as much funding as possible but was concerned that providing additional funding to address the deficits could set a dangerous precedent for schools in the future in managing those deficits.

Councillor Dave Mackie commented on how the additional funding to address secondary school deficits had been calculated and said that there was concern around how this funding would continue in the future. He stated that if the funding continued, two of the schools would clear their deficits relatively quickly but the other schools would continue to need additional funding for a number of years. He explained that this was an assumption, as this had not been addressed within the report. He added that all schools across Flintshire should be recognised for working hard to address their deficits and remain within their allocated budgets and recognised that Flintshire continued to be an underfunded Council. He supported consistent allocation of funding and suggested that this be considered as part of the school funding formula. He also felt that the views of Secondary Headteachers should be considered when reviewing secondary school funding in the future.

The Chair commented that the proposal would be discussed at the forthcoming School Budget Forum meeting. He welcomed the Chief Executive's clarification around equity and that the objective was to address the deficit with notional amounts afforded to schools. He added that all schools were under significant pressure and that it was gratifying that the Council was able to provide additional funding to address the deficit. He referred to the underfunding of Councils and the comments made by the Chief Executive that there should be a minimum allocation which enabled Councils to provide their services and also a top up allocation to meet the needs of deprivation etc. and if that were the case it should be that a bare minimum was allocated to each school and top up thereafter.

The Leader said that from an equity point of view he did not believe that the size and viability of a school should matter when it came to the educational offer that was provided to children across Flintshire. He advised that school deficits had been subject to a great deal of scrutiny and referred to the work undertaken by himself and Chief Officers, together with the finance team to consider all options to resolve this. He reiterated his previous comments and said that Members had been right to take the decision at County Council to ensure every child received access to the same basic curriculum offer.

The Chief Executive, in response to the comments made by Mr. Connolly, said that he did not want a situation where schools were being pitched against each other.

He appreciated all of the work undertaken by Headteachers and staff to balance budgets and to try and reduce their deficits. In response to the comments made by Councillor Mackie, he explained that if the additional funding had been spread across all Schools there would be no impact on the reduction of School deficits. On increasing the spend per pupils, he added that it was not possible to confirm what WG settlements would be in the future, but that the Council would continue to make the case that better funding was required to meet the challenge of addressing School deficits.

The Chair thanked the Chief Executive for his comments and said that he greatly appreciated the additional funding for schools which would be highly beneficial. He said that whilst he believed every effort had been made by the Council over a number of years to maintain school budgets, the education budget had been cut by 2% back in 1997 and that this funding had never been returned.

The Chief Officer responded to comments around consultation, and said that during a meeting with the Head Teachers Secondary Heads Federation, it was acknowledged that communication around the proposal to provide additional funding could have been better, but commented on the positive and transparent relationship with Head Teachers and colleagues. She reported on the robust process for supporting schools that were in a deficit position and that the Council had further strengthened the licensed deficit protocol in the light of the Estyn recommendations. She said there were a significant number of factors over a long period of time which had resulted in those deficit positions and that Headteachers had worked really hard to try and manage those.

In response to comments around challenge and scrutiny, the Chief Officer said that she welcomed the challenge from the Committee.

Councillor Tudor Jones sought clarification that the additional funding was not going directly to Schools, but was being used to reduce the deficits that sit with the Council. He suggested changing the wording in recommendation (a) to "That the Committee support the principles as the basis for allocating the £1m additional funding to reduce deficits of secondary schools in 2021/22, as set out within the report. The Chief Executive thanked Councillor Jones for the helpful clarification. He sought a steer from the Committee in terms of future steps year on year in the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) which was currently being reviewed, in order to make a case for similar investments year on year, providing the settlement from WG allowed this to occur.

The Chair thanked officers for their attendance and answering the questions from the Committee. He suggested that the Committee write to Mrs. Lucy Morris who had recently retired from the Council, to thank her for the support she had provided to schools during financial challenging times, and also the support she had provided to the Committee. This suggestion was supported by the Committee.

Following discussion, the recommendations outlined within the report, together with the suggested amendment to recommendation 1, as suggested by Councillor Tudor Jones and with the following additional recommendation, were moved and seconded by Councillors Tudor Jones and Gladys Healey:-

- That the Committee support the Council's intent to raise the amount of funding to support schools year on year, in line with the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS).

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee support the principles as the basis for allocating the £1m additional funding to reduce deficits of secondary schools in 2021/22, on the basis as set out within the report;
- (b) That the allocations, as set out in Appendix 2 of the report, be noted; and
- (c) That the Committee support the Council's intent to raise the amount of funding to support schools year on year, in line with the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS).

46. HWB DIGITAL PROGRAMME

The Primary Learning Advisor introduced a report which provided details of the implementation of the national HWB programme in Flintshire schools and the work undertaken to increase the ratios of devices to pupils.

During the pandemic there had been constant communication with schools and a gap analysis of devices was carried out. This provided information on how many devices were already in schools which had been very encouraging but there were more required to meet the formula agreed with the schools. The Primary Learning Advisor confirmed there was a need for 6,000 more devices following the last delivery into schools in January and February and confirmed there was also an order of Chrome Books which was due in May from WG which would meet some of the needs in the gap analysis.

There had been very positive feedback from schools regarding blended learning with detailed analysis shown in section 1.04 of the report. The Primary Learning Advisor confirmed MiFi devices were procured as part of the HWB and these had gone to families who did not have enough Wi-Fi connection. She referred to the Neumark Foundation who had supported all of the North Wales Authorities procuring a further 110 devices and about 80 or 90 devices had been deployed directly to schools where they were needed. A sustainable model would be put in through the School funding formula to ensure all schools had the same equipment as schools would now be required to maintain the same level of devices and hopefully all learners would have more devices to do their homework.

Councillor Dave Mackie referred to the financial impact on schools on their commitment to keep the devices up to date and fund repairs etc. which could be an expensive cost in the future. He understood this was being considered as an allocation on funding within the school budget formula and asked if schools were aware of the cost implications. In response, the Primary Learning Advisor advised that additional funding was to be provided to Schools as digital devices would now be a key part of pupil's education and digital equipment was the new resource that schools needed to budget for. This would be discussed further at the forthcoming School Budget Forum meeting.

Councillor Smith as for clarification on the PSBA Network. In response, the Chief Officer commented that this was the internet network which was routed through the council's network to schools to ensure the firewalls were maintained together with internet speeds. The Primary Learning Advisor added that this was monitored by the Council's IT department and that during lockdown most schools had had sufficient capacity. The Chief Officer confirmed that if there were issues with the bandwidth used by schools to deliver lessons then schools were able to escalate this with the IT Department.

The Senior Manager (School Improvement) confirmed the term PSBA was the Public Sector Broadband Aggregation across lots of public sector networks all the way through Wales where usage could be monitored. Education delivery had changed over the last few months with more online virtual lessons to children in school and out of school. Capacity changes and usage data provided by WG enabled schools to forward plan to ensure there was enough capacity during peaks of use. Schools and school governors would be involved in the strategic plans for their school to future proof costs for maintenance and replacement of devices and she commented how much the pupils had improved their digital capabilities and embraced the digital world.

The Chair commented on the remarkable achievements and paid tribute to the Council and Corporate IT team for the support provided to Schools. He said that he was reassured that bandwidth was being monitored, especially for those areas with low internet speed.

Mrs Rebecca Stark asked what access was given to pupils to search the internet. Was it only education sites that could be accessed through their devices or could they access social media sites etc. In response, the Primary Learning Advisor confirmed that HWB was the platform for digital learning with learners and teachers given HWB emails. She added that as part of their work pupils would be able to use safe internet search tools to search for things online with the google platforms hosted by HWB. The Chief Officer added that pupils could access anything on the internet but using the HWB and the council's firewall ensured they were protected and that the MiFi devices required a parent to sign a safeguarding statement ensuring that young person used that device appropriately.

The recommendations, as outlined within the report were moved and seconded by Councillors Paul Cunningham and Ian Smith.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the implementation of the National HWB programme in Flintshire schools and the work undertaken to increase the ratios of devices to pupils be noted; and
- (b) That the Committee was assured that Flintshire learners had not been digitally disadvantaged during the lockdown period by the effective actions of schools and the Council's Education and IT Services.

47. RECOVERY STRATEGY UPDATE

The Chief Officer (Education and Youth) introduced a report to provide an oversight on the recovery planning for the Committee's respective portfolio. She referred to the portfolio risk register and risk mitigation actions which were appended to the report and reported on the most significant risk; secondary school funding, which had been discussed earlier in the meeting.

The Chair applauded the support of the HR team to schools asked that the Committee's thanks be passed to the team.

The recommendation, outlined within the report, was moved and seconded by Mrs Rebecca Stark and Councillor Dave Mackie.

RESOLVED:

That the updated Risk Register and Risk Mitigation Actions, as outlined within the report, be noted.

48. MEMBERS OF THE PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There was one members of the press in attendance.

(The meeting started at 2.00 pm and ended at 4.45 pm)

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Chairman