

EDUCATION, YOUTH & CULTURE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
16 SEPTEMBER 2021

Minutes of the virtual meeting of the Education, Youth & Culture Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held on Thursday 16 September 2021.

PRESENT: Councillor David Healey (Chair)

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

CO-OPTED MEMBER:

Lynn Bartlett

APOLOGIES: Councillor Sian Braun and Mrs Wendy White

CONTRIBUTORS:

Councillor Ian Roberts, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Education; Councillor Christine Jones, Deputy Leader of the Council (Partnerships) & Cabinet Member for Social Services; Councillor Paul Johnson, Cabinet Member for Finance, Social Value and Procurement; Chief Executive; Chief Officer (Education & Youth); Senior Manager (School Improvement); Senior Manager (Inclusion and Progression) Corporate Finance Manager and Strategic Finance Manager (For agenda item 5 and 6)

IN ATTENDANCE:

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

14. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

There were no declarations of interest.

15. MINUTES

The minutes of the joint meeting held on 17 June and the ordinary meeting held on 1 July, 2021 were received.

The minutes of the joint meeting held on 17 June were approved, as moved and seconded by Councillor Tudor Jones and Councillor Paul Cunningham.

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 July were approved, as moved and seconded by Councillor Paul Cunningham and Councillor Janet Axworthy.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes be approved as a correct record.

16. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME AND ACTION TRACKING

The Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator presented the report and confirmed that the Forward Work Programme had been populated since the last meeting of the Committee. She drew Members attention to the report on Elective Home Education, scheduled to be presented at the next meeting of the Committee, which had been added to the Forward Work Programme, following a request from Councillor Gladys Healey at a recent meeting.

The Facilitator suggested amendments to the Forward Work Programme, which included a verbal update at the next meeting which would cover the portfolio risks identified by the Recovery Committee around the impact of the pandemic on children and young people on their health and emotional wellbeing and the resilience in schools whilst managing a significant number changes. It was also suggested that an update report on the successful delivery of the Flintshire Play schemes and Welsh Government funded Summer of Fun programme be reported to the December meeting. The Committee supported the addition of the suggested items.

The Facilitator also provided information on the two ongoing actions, as outlined in appendix 2 of the report.

In response to questions on the report on Elective Home Education, the Chief Officer confirmed that the report would provide information of the numbers of pupils currently being electively home educated together with the Council's Statutory Responsibilities and an overview of how the Inclusion Welfare Service discharges the Council's function with regard to these pupils. The report would also provide a broad overview of the reasons why parents had made the decision to electively home educate their children.

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

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.

17. BUDGET 2022/23 – STAGE 2

The Chief Executive, Corporate Finance Manager and Chief Officer (Education & Youth) introduced the second budget stage report which detailed the forecast and the cost pressures which would make-up the total budget requirement.

A report to Cabinet and the Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee in July provided an updated position on the budget for 2022/23. The cost pressures identified were referred to the respective Overview & Scrutiny Committees with a request that they all undergo a rigorous review. The details of the cost pressures for Education and Youth were included in the report.

The Chief Executive, Corporate Finance Manager and Chief Officer (Education & Youth) provided a detailed presentation which covered the following areas:-

- Purpose and Background
- Summary Totals of Cost Pressures
 - Education & Youth Pressures
 - School Budget Pressures
- Summary of all Cost Pressures
- Out of County Budget Pressure
- Strategic Solutions
- Update on Efficiencies
- Budget Timelines

In response to comments and questions around funding for free schools meals, the Chief Officer confirmed that the challenges to purchase a meal and a snack had been highlighted by students and it was hoped that if there was flexibility within the budget to uplift this, it would be very much welcomed. The situation in primary schools was that meals were prepared from a number of options. At the secondary level it was more of a cafeteria style with more choices available for the young people. The pressure on children at not being able to purchase the same as their peers made them feel different with less money in their credit account. The Chief Officer also confirmed that NEWydd were very skilled in providing excellent food which met the standard nutritional requirements. An uplift for the secondary aged pupils would be beneficial.

The Chief Executive reported that an increase in free school meal allowance had been included within the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), to increase the allowance subject to affordability. He welcomed the cost pressures at Plas Derwen PRU, which were aspirations to improve the learning environment and provide greater capacity. Regarding the cost pressures for new posts, this had been circulated to all portfolios to provide information on their critical needs for which a robust process had been undertaken to prioritise those which required serious consideration. The pandemic had accentuated some of the gaps but these would be reviewed if a balanced budget was not achieved next year.

Councillor Dave Mackie supported the comments made by the Chief Officer around the uplift in free school meals, which had been raised as a concern by young people at meetings of the Children's Services Forum. He commented on cost pressures and said that some of them had been agreed during the setting of the 2021/22 budget and suggested that where cost pressures had been agreed in previous years, this should be indicated in the reports. The Chief Executive suggested that future reports be adjusted to include pre-agreed decisions and new cost pressures for the 2022/23 budget.

Councillor Janet Axworthy commented on the cost pressures for the Joint Archive Service and said that it was disappointing that the recent lottery bid had been unsuccessful. She hoped that future bids would be successful as this was such an important initiative within the Council. The Chair asked if there had been any feedback on the lottery bid. The Chief Officer agreed that the unsuccessful bid had been disappointing but provided an assurance that the bid was excellent and that nothing more could have been done to improve the bid but unfortunately there had been insufficient national funds available.

The Chair commented on discussion held between the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and the WG around the settlement for teacher's pay. He said that the decision for 1% of the increase to be funded locally had financial implications on the Council and schools and sought clarification on how this would be funded. He also asked if WG had indicated if they would be fully funding green book pay awards.

In response, the Chief Executive confirmed that 1% of the increase would be funded between schools and the Council. Moving forward, work had to be carried out on how future pay awards would be funded but for the remainder of 2021/22 it would be funding through the reserves with the full recurring amount going into the base budget. He reiterated that the Council's position was to expect Governments to fully fund pay awards particularly WG as it was a devolved issue. He also confirmed that there was no additional funding for the green book pay awards in the current financial year as this was still under negotiation and not complete.

The Leader of the Council commented on previous statements from WG that the introduction of the Additional Learning Needs Bill would be cost neutral and that this had not been the case. At a recent meeting with the WLGA and WG concerned had been raised again around providing necessary funding to meet the requirements of the Bill. He also provided information the extensive discussions between the WLGA and WG around pay awards and the WG expected Local Authorities to prepare calculations in anticipation of the pay awards agreed. He said that it was difficult to anticipate what figure the independent review panel was likely to put forward and when the award would be announced.

Councillor Mackie commented on the investment in delegated school budgets, as outlined within the report and presentation. He said that the additional £1M allocated within the 2021/22 budget had been welcomed and he fully appreciated that its purpose had been linked to the Estyn Inspection recommendation that the reduction in school budget deficits was managed more effectively. He said that he was unsure how the additional £1M cost pressure for the 2022/23 budget would be allocated to schools and asked why it was felt necessary to include an additional £1M.

In response, the Chief Executive explained that there were two £1M allocations, £1M within the 2021/22 budget and £1M proposed within the 2022/23 budget. He was pleased the Council was in a position to have any additional money available within the budget before decisions were made on how it was spent. Last year's £1M for 2021/22 remained the same for 2122/23 and the proposals were how this extra £1M could be used from next April. He said that its predominant purpose

was to support secondary schools with recurring deficits and/or secondary schools that could move into an increasing deficit position. The Chief Executive added that the amount which was put in last year recurred and was in the base budget for this year. The additional £1M, if supported, would be used to reduce deficits as per the Estyn recommendation.

The Leader of the Council echoed the Chief Executive's comments and explained that it was for all Members of the Council to decide whether the proposed additional £1M would be included within the 2022/23 budget. He said that was pleased to see that the number of secondary schools in a surplus budget position was improving.

Councillor Mackie sought clarification on what the £1M investment in delegated schools budget would be used for and felt that this information was necessary to enable Members to support the budget setting process. The Chief Executive explained that it was very early in the budget setting process and that the proposed £1M additional funding may not be included in the final budget proposals if it was not affordable. Prior to setting the budget, information on how this additional funding would be allocated would be provided to all Members.

The Chair thanked the Committee and officers for the detailed discussion around the proposed cost pressures outlined within the report.

Following discussion on the recommendations outlined within the report, it was suggested that the Committee support the portfolio cost pressures and that no further cost efficiency areas be proposed. It was also suggested that further information on how the proposed £1M investment in delegated school budgets is disseminated to Schools be provided to the Committee.

The recommendations, as outlined above, were moved and seconded by Councillor Dave Mackie and Councillor Paul Cunningham.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee supports the Education and Youth Portfolio cost pressures;
- (b) That no further cost efficiency areas be proposed by the Committee to be explored further; and
- (c) That further information on how the proposed £1M Investment in Delegated School Budgets is disseminated to Schools be provided to the Committee.

18. SCHOOL RESERVES YEAR ENDING 31 MARCH 2021

The Chief Officer (Education & Youth) presented the report which provided information on the overall level of reserves held by Flintshire schools. The level of school reserves had increased across all sectors and was in part due to the number of additional grants being awarded to schools in recognition of the issues caused by the pandemic. These grants were awarded at a late stage during the financial year and inflated the level of school reserves.

Councillor Dave Mackie commented on previous discussions around the revised school funding formula and felt that a revised version would ensure that the formula was easier to understand. He raised concerns around the difference in funding for schools which had similar pupil numbers and suggested that because of this, the funding allocated and total funding available should be reviewed to ensure that there wasn't such a difference in funding in different counties across Wales. The Leader of the Council said that it was not possible compare funding for similar sized schools across different counties in Wales as there could be a number of reasons for the difference. In Flintshire, every secondary school pupil was treated the same except for those with additional needs. He added that a raw data comparison based on pupil numbers would depend on the type of county, with larger schools in urban areas. Smaller rural schools were vital to provide education for pupils in the areas they lived.

The Chief Executive agreed with the Leader comments and advised that the Council's biggest expenditure was on education. Flintshire remained a lower funded Council and if this increased then it would be possible to increase spend per pupil. Despite this, the Council had increased funding where possible with limited resources.

The recommendation, as outlined within the report, was moved and seconded by Councillor Janet Axworthy and Councillor Ian Smith.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee note the level of school reserves as at the 31st March, 2021, as outlined within the report.

19. COVID-19 SCHOOLS OPERATIONAL UPDATE

The Chief Executive introduced the report which detailed the arrangements for the safe return to schools, as outlined in the revised Welsh Government (WG) Covid-19 Operational Guidance and Local Covid-19 Infection Decision Framework.

The Senior Manager (School Improvement) reported that the Education Minister had advised all schools at the end of the summer term that the guiding principle for September was that they should operate as normally as possible including the provision of free breakfast and after school clubs, extra-curricular activities and practical subjects. The detailed operational guidance for schools had been slimmed down and was being replaced by a Local Covid-19 Infection Decision Framework. The Framework enabled interventions to be tailored to the level of local risk and schools were expected to transition to this new Framework by 20 September, 2021.

All Flintshire schools opened successfully at the start of the new academic year with schools continuing to have detailed risk assessments in place to ensure a suitable hierarchy of controls. These were now being amended to align with the new Framework.

The Chair welcomed the comments made by the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) at a recent Recovery Committee meeting around the low number of teaching and ancillary staff absences, which had been positive. He said that he had been apprehensive of pupils returning to school but was pleased that the term had started positively.

Councillor Dave Mackie suggested that the Committee show its appreciation of the school leadership, which had been enabled pupils to return to schools safely. He commented on schools taking a more lenient approach in order to support learners during the pandemic but felt that moving forward, schools had to re-install discipline in a nurturing way and support parents to ensure this happened. The Facilitator confirmed that during the next meeting, the Committee would provide a verbal update on the impact the pandemic had had on young people specifically on their health and well-being and their ability to engage with learning.

The Senior Manager (Inclusion and Progression) responded to the comments made by Councillor Mackie and outlined that schools had worked extremely hard to keep parents informed on current Covid-19 restrictions in schools. Reassurances on the measures placed in schools were also provided to parents. The council's wider services had also worked to keep parents updated on processes, providing advice on benefits and support accessing IT across the Council Services.

Councillor Gladys Healey referred to the pressures on children and young people which now included vaccination with the proposals to vaccinate children 12 years and over. As pupils were now able to provide their own consent was this adding to their pressures. In response, the Chief Executive said that this was an ethical question balancing this with the Human Rights Act and Children's Legal Rights. His understanding was that it would be vaccinators or GPs who would decide if a pupil was able to give consent. This was beyond the Council's control.

In response to Councillor Mackie's comments, Councillor Gladys Healey suggested that a letter be written to all Schools by the Chair, on behalf of the Committee, thanking them for their hard work in ensuring pupils returned to school safely. This suggestion was supported by the Committee.

The recommendation, as outlined within the report, was moved and seconded by Councillor Bob Connah and Councillor Martin White.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee note the arrangements for the safe return to schools as outlined in the revised Welsh Government Covid-19 Operational Guidance and Local Covid-19 Infection Decision Framework.

20. ESTYN THEMATIC REVIEW UPDATE

The Senior Manager (School Improvement) presented the report which provided details of the five key recommendation for the Welsh Government (WG) and Councils to address following the thematic review of the work undertaken by the education departments of each Council in Wales to support their learning

communities in schools and pupil referral units (PRU's) during the period from March to October 2020.

Flintshire's first review letter, received in January 2021, had been very positive. During the summer term of 2021, Estyn conducted follow up reviews with all Councils in Wales to consider the progress being made against their initial recommendations in the national thematic review. The review culminated in a second letter to the Chief Executive which provided a high degree of assurance that the Portfolio had continued to work effectively through its own resources and through its support for schools in partnership with GwE. A copy of the letter, which contained feedback on the Council's response to the five recommendations was attached at Appendix 1 of the report.

The Senior Manager concluded that the thematic review had captured the positive changes around digital and blended learning and the progress made towards the new curriculum.

The Chief Executive welcomed the letter which he said had provided a level of assurance. The Chair echoed the comments made and said that schools should be commended for the work undertaken.

The recommendations, as outlined within the report, were moved and seconded by Councillor Dave Mackie and Councillor Janet Axworthy.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the Committee acknowledge the effective work of the Education Portfolio, in conjunction with the regional school improvement service (GwE), in ensuring Flintshire learners continued to receive effective educational provision through the Covid-19 pandemic; and
- (b) That the Committee note the positive progress made against each of the five Estyn recommendations in the national thematic review by the Education Portfolio and schools.

21. 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 4.04 pm)

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Chairman