

EDUCATION, YOUTH & CULTURE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
11 MAY 2023

Minutes of the hybrid meeting of the Education, Youth & Culture Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held on Thursday 11 May 2023.

PRESENT: Councillor Teresa Carberry (Chair)

Councillors: Bill Crease, Gladys Healey, Dave Mackie, Ryan McKeown, Andrew Parkhurst, Carolyn Preece, David Richardson, Jason Shallcross and Arnold Woolley

CO-OPTES: Mrs Lynne Bartlett and Lisa Allen

SUBSTITUTIONS: Councillor Mel Buckley (for Councillor Paul Cunningham)

APOLOGIES: Wendy White and Councillor Ian Roberts

CONTRIBUTORS:

Councillor Mared Eastwood, Cabinet Member for Education, Welsh Language, Culture and Leisure and Chief Officer (Education & Youth)

Senior Manager (Inclusion and Progression) (for minute number 6)

Senior Manager (School Improvement) (for minute numbers 7 and 8)

Senior Primary Learning Adviser (for minute number 8)

IN ATTENDANCE:

Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator and Democratic Services Officer

1. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

The Facilitator advised that at the Annual Meeting, Council determined that the Labour Group would chair this Committee. The Committee was advised that Councillor Teresa Carberry was the Chair of the Committee for the municipal year.

RESOLVED:

That the appointment of Councillor Teresa Carberry as Chair of the Committee be noted.

2. APPOINTMENT OF VICE CHAIR

Councillor Gladys Healey nominated Councillor Carolyn Preece as Vice-Chair of the Committee. This was seconded by Councillor Mel Buckley.

There were no other nominations.

RESOLVED:

That Councillor Carolyn Preece be appointed Vice-Chair of the Committee.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING DECLARATIONS)

None were received.

4. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on the 23 March 2023 were approved as moved and seconded by Councillor Gladys Healey and Councillor Dave Mackie.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 23 March 2023 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

5. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME AND ACTION TRACKING

In presenting the report, the Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator outlined the items which were being presented to the annual joint meeting with the Social & Health Care Overview & Scrutiny Committee on the 29 of June. Referring to the Forward Work Programme she confirmed there was one change, the GwE Annual Report, which was now being presented to the September meeting of the Committee.

The Chief Officer (Education & Youth) said she hoped to bring three additional items to the July meeting, these were Healthy Schools, the School Meals Services and an update on the IT issues around the PSPA and national infrastructure.

The Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator referred to the Action Tracking Report confirming that most of the actions had been completed. Referring to the School Parking Task & Finish Group, she confirmed that an email had been sent seeking nominations to both the Environment & Economy and Education Youth & Culture Overview & Scrutiny Committees. Cabinet had been supportive of the formation of the Task & Finish Group but had suggested that the membership should cover a number of areas across Flintshire and include rural and urban areas. This was currently being reviewed and the Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator would be contacting Members with information on the first meeting of the Task & Finish Group once formalised.

Councillor Andrew Parkhurst referred to the response provided to his questions raised during the last meeting on the Council Plan 2023/28 Development report around fixed term and permanent exclusions. He thanked officers for the response but said that it did not answer the questions he had raised. He explained that his questions had been around the baseline figures for 2021/22. The Senior Manager (Inclusion & Progression) suggested that she provide this information as part of the discussion on the Attendance & Exclusion report later in the meeting.

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

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.

6. ATTENDANCE & EXCLUSIONS

Introducing this report, the Chair commented that the figures may seem concerning, but this was not just a Flintshire issue, it was a national one. Children were finding it difficult to re-engage with education with some not wanting to go back to school. Schools were working hard to address those problems with creative working and establishing better links with the Education Welfare Service and GwE.

In presenting the report the Senior Manager (Inclusion & Progression) provided an overview of the key points for 2021/22, which were based on the data held in Flintshire as the national data from Welsh Government (WG) had been paused during the Covid restrictions. Attendance in Flintshire remained below pre-pandemic levels which was a concern across all authorities with officers and schools working hard to re-engage with those learners. Flintshire had a slight rise in attendance levels across primary schools with a drop in secondary schools, because of high levels of anxiety and mental health difficulties. Illness was still the main criteria for absence and discussions had been held with Head Teachers to ensure they challenged parents appropriately on whether, or not, to accept the reasons given for their child's absence. The lack of availability of school nurses was challenging and work was ongoing with health colleagues to ensure that appropriate provision was made in schools.

The Senior Manager referred to point 1.04 of the report which highlighted the creative ways that some secondary schools were working to help pupils to make that first step back into education, with alternative provision provided in schools and in external community sites such as the Community Hub. Schools were not able to do this alone and point 1.05 of the report provided information on the range of services who were working to support them. Referring to the previous 2019 Estyn Report, the Senior Manager provided an update on the pupil data for attendance and the targeted interventions with those pupils who were at risk of reduced attendance or exclusion. An example was given of the piloted work from years 6 to 7 which had resulted in attendance levels being maintained with an overview of the changes made located at point 1.07 in the report.

The Senior Manager confirmed the Fixed Penalty process had been re-established this year and used to support attendance. 10 Fixed Penalty Notices had been issued with some progressing to court proceedings and been upheld. It was hoped that this would impress upon parents that attendance was important and taken seriously by schools and the local authority. Attendance levels were concerning with mental health and anxiety the biggest challenge moving forward and she provided information on the different services supporting schools which included CAMHS.

Trauma Informed Practice was being promoted across schools and services to support an understanding of the challenges faced by young people during the pandemic and the long-lasting impacts of it together with other social factors. Referring to the data received from WG the authority was currently in the upper quartile of attendance nationally at 4th and 5th position for this academic year, which was promising compared with the levels pre-covid.

The Senior Manager also referred to resources, explaining that there was a current financial pressure on the Inclusion and Progression Service because of the increased numbers of requests from schools for pupils to receive individualised home tuition plans. Prior to the pandemic the number was around 30 but this had risen to 90 individuals requiring that high level of individualised support. This was a significant pressure, with the service utilising grant funding currently, but this was highlighted as a financial pressure moving forward.

In response to a question raised by Councillor Gladys Healey around the number of attendance officers across Flintshire, the Senior Manager confirmed there were 6 Education Welfare Officers and 3 Education Support Officers in the team at present. Councillor Healey also suggested that the Home-Schooling Officer be invited to attend a future meeting of the Committee to give an outline their work and the support they provided to these pupils.

In response to the question from Councillor Dave Mackie on the collection of data from Head Teachers, the Chief Officer (Education & Youth) outlined the process undertaken around fixed term and permanent exclusions. There were key stages that the school had to follow, which included the reason(s) for that exclusion which were recorded and coded under a range of categories. Following discussions at the Head Teacher Federations, officers and Head Teachers reviewed the policies and intervention strategies and worked to develop new approaches to strengthen procedures and support Head Teachers when managing these difficult situations.

The Senior Manager (Inclusion & Progression) advised that following discussions with the Secondary Head Federation, meetings had been held with secondary Head Teachers to discuss these challenges, unpick the reasons and situations in each school to enable a better understanding of the challenges across Flintshire schools and then to look at solutions. An outline was given of the Trauma Informed Practice sessions held with Head Teachers on how this could be embedded across the schools and enable best practice to be shared. A group had been established to understand what was needed to provide that wrap around support to those pupils who had been permanently excluded to enable them to be successful. A similar exercise would be undertaken with the primary sector.

In response to Councillor Mackie's comments around potentially fast-tracking processes to enable the best outcome for the child, the Senior Manager explained that robust processes were in place to ensure that there were equal opportunities for every child with a clear process to support professionals in making the best decision for each individual child. The team tried to be as creative and responsive as possible within the requirements of the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) reforms, which was an integral requirement for the authority and all schools.

In response to a question from Councillor Jason Shallcross, the Senior Manager advised that the decline in attendance was across all schools and was not related to deprivation. This was a national trend across the Country.

Councillor Carolyn Preece commended the team especially as Flintshire was in the top quartile across Wales which proved that the strategies being put in place were working, especially the Belonging Strategy.

In response to questions from Councillor Andrew Parkhurst around the figures for exclusions in Table 4 and 5 of the report and the Council Plan, considered at the previous meeting, the Senior Manager suggested that information on the baseline data for 2020-21 and how this varied to the data in the Council Plan, be circulated following the meeting.

Councillor Parkhurst also asked if within the exclusion data, there was a breakdown between looked after children and other children. The Senior Manager confirmed that a report on looked after children would be presented to the Committee at its joint meeting with the Social & Health Care Overview & Scrutiny Committee in June. She explained that in the exclusion analysis pupils were flagged if they were looked after children or had additional learning needs and that this information could be collated. She outlined the role of the Manager within the Inclusion Service who had responsibility for looking at data for looked after children to establish if any of those pupils could be targeted to receive additional support. She agreed to collate that information to enable a comparison to be made.

In response to comments around the recommendations made within the Sir Alasdair McDonald report, the Senior Manager reported that the recommendations had been discussed within the portfolio and with colleagues in Social Services. An Action Plan had been drawn up outlining the requirements to move towards the report recommendations. She referred to the application for grant funding which had been refused because the model was based on a vulnerable learner model rather than a distinct looked after children model. Discussions had been held with Welsh Government (WG) who had refused to move on this until after the current three-year funding period had expired. Hopefully after this period there would be additional grant funding available to support the virtual school model as it is expensive and more information would be provided at the joint meeting in June. She agreed with Councillor Parkhurst that every looked after child should have a personal education plan and work was ongoing with colleagues in Social Services to ensure the plans were highly detailed.

The Chief Officer outlined the frustration around the unsuccessful bid to WG, which she felt had been sustainable. She explained that a Virtual Head Teacher was a significant resource implication and that the pilot funding was only short-term funding. It was identified that this posed a financial risk to the local authority and a cost pressure should that funding cease and WG could not confirm that there would be long term funding as this was a pilot. In the meantime, an Action Plan had been put in place together with a dedicated Senior Manager to progress within the resources that were available.

In response to concerns raised by Councillor Bill Crease around the number of

pupils who were not in school, the Senior Manager referred to unauthorised absences and advised that there was a high level of challenge by Head Teachers when the reason provided by the parent or carer was unacceptable. This enabled the school to progress this down the fixed penalty route as it provided the evidence to support this. Whilst the figures were concerning it did show that there was greater challenge, and that Head Teachers were not accepting a response the parent had made where they felt it was not appropriate.

The Chief Officer said the safeguarding of young people was something the portfolio took seriously, and the Inclusion team were visiting schools very frequently and cross-referencing other information around a particular young person or family and where there were safeguarding concerns they would be followed through. The Senior Manager agreed saying safeguarding was an integral part of the Education Welfare Service and advised that there was also a dedicated officer for children missing in education who worked closely with the community, schools and family engagement officers.

Councillor Dave Mackie, in referring to the comments previously made by Councillor Preece, suggested that an additional recommendation be added as follows:-

- That the Committee were pleased to learn that the attendance figures for Flintshire schools were within the upper quartile in terms of comparative data across Wales.

The recommendation, as outlined within the report, together with the additional recommendation suggested by Councillor Mackie was moved by Councillor Carolyn Preece and seconded by Councillor Mackie.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the attendance and exclusion data for Flintshire schools and the actions undertaken by officers to support increased engagement and the safety and wellbeing of children and young people be noted; and
- (b) That the Committee were pleased to learn that the attendance figures for Flintshire schools were within the upper quartile in terms of comparative data across Wales.

7. SUPPORTING SERVICE CHILDREN IN EDUCATION

In presenting the update report, the Senior Manager (School Improvement) confirmed this followed a report which had been presented to the Committee in December 2021 and included information on the national and local work being undertaken to support service children in schools.

The Senior Manager reported that the authority worked closely with Supporting Service Children in Education (SSCE) Cymru, and the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and she was pleased that Jane Borthwick (Senior Primary Learning Adviser) was present at the meeting. She explained that the Senior Primary

Learning Adviser led on this, working closely with schools, SSCE and the Regional Schools Liaison Officer and through this work it was possible to maximise the grant funding which supported professionals in schools to better understand their roles in supporting service children. This also enabled resources and engagement activities for those learners. Although there was only a small amount of funding available, it was possible to see the positive impact that this was making. The Senior Manager provided information on the work carried out over the last three years to understand the needs of service children and enabled targeted support to be provided.

The Senior Primary Learning Adviser commented on the excellent day held at Ty Calon in Deeside which was attended by several schools with children from the age of 5 to 11 enjoying playing games together. It was also pleasing to see service parents attending too. Following on from this event a pen pal project was being set up so that the children could keep in touch, especially those moving up to high school. Work was continuing to raise the profile of service children in education and to provide support to them and their families. This was very positive, and another event had been arranged for June at Flint High School with more secondary learners taking part.

Councillor Bill Crease thanked officers for the report and was pleased to see the positive impact the support had made to service children and provided an outline of his own personal experience.

The Chief Officer thanked the Senior Manager and Senior Primary Learning Adviser for their work with service children in schools. She also extended an invitation to Members of the committee who would like to attend the event in June and the Senior Primary Learning Adviser agreed to liaise with the Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator to circulate the information to Members.

The Senior Primary Learning Adviser also offered the opportunity for Members to join the meetings which were held with the other stakeholders. Councillor Dave Mackie and the Chair put their names forward.

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

RESOLVED:

That the Committee confirms that it had received an appropriate level of assurance regarding the work of the Education & Youth Portfolio in supporting schools who have Service children.

8. TACKLING INEQUALITY

In presenting the report, the Senior Manager (School Improvement) explained that the report provided an overview of the impact of poverty and the achievement gap for learners across Wales between those from more affluent households with those from more disadvantaged backgrounds. This had been a challenge across Wales for many years and had been highlighted since the pandemic with Tackling Poverty and Disadvantage a key theme for the portfolio in the Council Plan for 2023/28.

The Senior Manager referred Members to section 1 of the report which highlighted the national indicators which measured progress and the key findings from the recent research on the impacts of educational inequalities. Point 1.07 in the report provided information on the national focus and the research from the impacts of the pandemic, with points 1.08 and 1.09 providing information on how schools were able to use the Pupil Development Grant to access funding to support these pupils. Estyn were evaluating how schools used this funding and the authority had a strong profile in this regard. The Senior Manager then reported on the examples of good practice from the Adult Community Learning Team, the Healthy Schools Team and the commitment for all primary school children to receive a free school meal by 2024.

In response to a question from Councillor Dave Mackie, the Senior Manager agreed that ensuring that correct information was available to enable the authority to undertake support effectively was important. Comparing England with Wales was difficult as Wales had slightly different processes, outcomes, examination processes and the new curriculum. The key theme was that both nations needed to improve with both starting from a point of disadvantage with learners having more barriers and not achieving the same levels as those learners who were not disadvantaged. Welsh Government (WG) had revisited this and were looking at ways to accelerate progress across Wales.

Councillor Andrew Parkhurst referred to the ONS data which stated that disadvantaged children who had the same educational qualifications did not achieve the same in terms of higher wages and opportunities later in life. The reason seemed to be the engagement with the labour market, and he wondered if more could be done with regard to work experience and engagement with industry to enable disadvantaged children to obtain the social skills together with education to enable them to succeed.

The Senior Manager agreed with the comments made by Councillor Parkhurst saying work was being undertaken to revisit all these areas, linking with colleagues across North Wales on the Regional Skills Partnership Board, the Post 16 Learning Advisor and Secondary Heads Federation. This would enable a better understanding of the labour market, job opportunities and career aspirations which also included the Seren Network for progression to university for more able learners. It was also proposed to build stronger links with the Regional Skills Partnership Board to ensure Flintshire had stronger representations to work with schools. She agreed to provide an update to Committee on this work to a future meeting.

The Chief Officer reported that this was discussed recently at a Regional Skills Partnership meeting and was a high priority for the portfolio. The report demonstrated that this was a national issue, and the Council was looking at what could be done locally to address it. Schools were not able to do this on their own and the report highlighted the range of strategies the Council was trying to adopt to support schools. This started in the classroom with high quality teaching for every learner which met their individual needs. She referred to school improvement and the work with GwE to constantly raise the quality of teaching in classrooms to enable pupils to achieve their qualifications and ensure they were supported along their pathways to apprenticeships, college, university or the world of work. The work of the Adult Community Learning was another key strategy which supported young people as well as families and parents

with opportunities for educational engagement to enable them to progress in their working lives.

Mrs Lynne Bartlett referred to the third paragraph on page 54 of the report which highlighted the number of pupils on free school meals and asked if the reasons for the increase were known. Previously the funding received by Flintshire was based on the level of high employment and she was concerned that Flintshire was now near the average in Wales in terms of free school meals. There was increased levels of poverty in Flintshire and asked should more funding be received to support this.

In response the Chief Officer said the reasons for the increase in free school meals was varied with aspects of employment, families struggling, the cost-of-living crisis and the price of food. It was for the portfolio to ensure the contributions were made strategically through its policies to support schools and ensure that dialogue was live in their schools.

Councillor Bill Crease spoke of his personal experience and the understanding that education was the main way of moving away from a deprived environment. He said that this was not just about poverty but that aspiration to work to get something better had been lost from a generation of parents and grandparents. A large part of the problem sat outside school and engagement had to be made with parents, grandparents and carers on this long path. He explained that Wales and Scotland received more money through the Barnett Formula than England so it was about engaging with people and society as a whole and would not be resolved until that was tackled.

Mrs Lisa Allen felt the Covid pandemic had highlighted the lack of accessibility of books, computers, internet access, quiet study spaces, safe places to sleep and availability of food at home. She asked if more community led approaches had been considered and that family learning was also key to breaking down inter-generational issues. She referred to the school uniform swap shop at her local school which was helping parents. With regard to universal free school meals, she asked if there were concerns around the drop in that grant funding and what was being put in place to ensure that did not happen and were parents aware that they were still required to apply for that grant funding.

The Senior Manager responded that a report on adult engagement activities would be presented by the Adult Learning Team at the July meeting, and she outlined what would be covered in this report. Free school meals were linked to the Pupil Development Grant and parents were encouraged to keep applying.

The Chief Officer said that this was a risk for the portfolio. The Welfare Benefits Team supported parents in obtaining all the benefits that they were entitled to which included free school meals. Communication on this would be continuing via the Council's social media platform and website to promote those key messages because if the free school meal entitlement figure dropped it would impact the funding that the schools received. Across Flintshire schools there was a long and proud tradition of Family Learning and engagement taking place in schools and the Adult Learning Partnership was providing extra opportunities for parents. Referring to school uniform she reported that WG had issued guidance to reduce the cost of school uniform by

removing logos and schools were being encouraged to take notice of this and provided information on the linking up of community-based school uniform exchange schemes. Discussions were being held with Streetscene colleagues to enable the collection of unwanted uniform from people's homes or Housing Recycling Centres with an application for funding made to WG via the circular economy to support this. These items would be collected by Streetscene and then washed, sorted and batched by NEWydd to be re-distributed to schools. During the pandemic, the portfolio had been acutely aware of families who were not able to access devices or broadband and through the work of the Senior Primary Learning Adviser schools were able to loan equipment and MiFi devices which enabled them to access Wi-Fi too. The Council's Digital Strategy was a key strand in tackling poverty to enable pupils to access these devices to support their education. Members were referred to point 1.10 in the report which outlined how important it was to understand how the school day, year or events impacted families who were in poverty. The Children's Commissioner had promoted the "Ask Ceri" campaign for schools to stop and think when planning events, trips, proms etc. to understand how these events impacted families in poverty.

Councillor Carolyn Preece said it was an awful situation and she was keen to see the impacts of the "ask Ceri" campaign in schools. She asked if it was possible to have a follow up report next year outlining the impacts of that campaign.

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

RESOLVED

That the Committee confirms that it had received an appropriate 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.

9. MEMBERS OF THE PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There were no members of the press in attendance.

(The meeting started at 2.00 p.m. and ended at 3.48 pm)

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Chair