

Minutes



Performance Scrutiny Committee - People

Date: 22 June 2021

Time: 10.00 am

Present: Councillors W Routley (Chair), H Thomas, J Richards, S Marshall, T Watkins, C Townsend, J Cleverly, Y Forsey, L Lacey and T Suller

Karyn Keane (Assistant Head of Education - Engagement & Learning), Andrew Powles (Assistant Head of Education - Engagement and Learning), Deborah Weston (Service Development Manager), Neil Barnett (Scrutiny Adviser), Connor Hall (Scrutiny Adviser) and Louise A Thomas (Governance Officer)

In Attendance:

Apologies: Councillors

1 Apologies

None.

2 Declarations of Interest

None.

3 2020/21 Service Plan End of Year Reviews

1. 20/21 Service Plan End of year review for Education Services

The Deputy Chief Education Officer provided an overview of the report stating that due to the pandemic, performance measures related to pupil outcomes, exclusions and attendance had been suspended. Welsh Government had introduced new methods of awarding grades for learners at both Key Stage 4 and 5 and so comparison to previous years was not appropriate. Tracking post 16 learners destinations was challenged by the national restrictions in place due to the pandemic and the percentage of young people who were deemed to have an 'unknown destination' on leaving school was higher than in previous years. However, Newport data for young people in Education, Employment and Training above compulsory school age remained strong and among the best in Wales.

Despite the pandemic significant work had continued by schools and central education and most actions within the service plan had progressed. The Covid pandemic had a significant impact on schools illustrated by periods of full closure or solely offering distanced learning, and the large scale operation of blended learning to enable pupils to continue learning when they were self-isolating as either individuals or as cohorts within a school.

Members asked the following:

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- Was the Service Area on target with its budget and if not, what mitigation methods were in place and what was the situation with certain individual schools?

The Deputy Chief Education officer confirmed that the Service was currently on target for this year. There had been a significant underspend last year of almost two million largely due to services such as transport, out of County placements, breakfast clubs etc. not being utilised over the past year. Those charges would be reinstated this year so the projection was for a balanced budget.

In relation to the situation with individual schools there were 4 schools which projected closing deficits but this was still a significant improvement. One of these was due to close and amalgamate with another school and the other three were Secondary schools which were being closely monitored and on track to reduce their levels of overspending, helped largely by the Covid situation. These would be closely monitored on a regular basis to ensure that their financial planning arrangements were robust with no chance of them slipping back into a deficit position.

- A member asked if through operating differently, schools had found methods of saving money and could any of these methods be used going forward?

The Assistant Head of Education explained that the Service was currently exploring Post 16 collaboration to see if elements of that could be delivered virtually. This meant that schools wouldn't have to operate necessarily in the current cluster formations and could potentially offer curriculum across more than one local authority. A big part of the work done was working with lots of individual schools to look at their learning from the pandemic, seeing what had been effective, not just in terms of cost savings but in terms delivering the best curriculum in order to receive the best results.

- Members asked about monitoring measures in place, schools using reserves and information sharing between schools.

The Assistant Head of Education responded that a financial template would be issued to schools to track where any overspend was, outlining the reasons behind that and whether it was a one off spend, in which case, there would be an impact in future years. This information would be returned by the end of term to allow quality assurance to be undertaken over the summer with a report to the Governing bodies for the Autumn term with any issues outlined for them to be aware of. This would also highlight schools that had large surpluses and would indicate how it was intended to be spent. It had been challenging to have a planned spend this year and fortunately some of the Welsh Government grants received late in the financial year could be carried forward.

It was then advised that there are a few different forums for information sharing. The School Budget Forum looked at the overall mechanism for funding schools and met four times a year to discuss things such as upcoming challenges, capital maintenance and IT systems. Deficit recovery meetings included members from Finance and the schools and had robust discussions around how schools managed their budgets and how they operated within the allocated funding.

- What criteria was used to measure the success of securing Education, Employment and Training for school leavers?

The Assistant Head of Education responded that data on destinations of young people from individual schools was accessed regularly and so were able to identify those who did not have a destination in place and provide the relevant support for

those learners. Newport was recognised regionally for good practice and the previous year our figures were better than the all Wales average. There were challenges last year due to Covid restrictions impacting the ability to check if the young people were accessing training, education or employment and this had resulted in a higher number of young people with an unknown destination than was originally targeted.

This was now an area to be focussed on, working much earlier whilst young people were still in school in order to support a higher number into a destination where possible. The young people who had an unsecure destination were often those learners who had an additional learning need, and we recognised that that was occasionally a barrier to their access to employment, training or education.

However, we supported those individuals in the same way as we supported others and in particular, our links with training providers were strong in that area so that we could support learners with additional learning needs into a relevant into a suitable destination.

- Has the Council continued to monitor school attendance throughout the pandemic and did the figures highlight persistent offenders.

The Deputy Chief Education Officer replied that although there was no statutory requirement this year to collect attendance data, as a Council we had asked schools to continue to collect and record this data daily. These figures were then shared monthly with all schools so that the Education Welfare service were aware of any issues. We expected the schools to monitor their own pupils and identify learners with particular attendance issues so they could be specifically targeted with additional support to help improve their attendance.

- How has the Council ensured that standards had been maintained throughout the pandemic, especially with blended learning?

The Deputy Chief Education Officer advised that this had been particularly difficult over the year as we had not been able to physically enter the schools to check and monitor. We had provided generic support for Head Teachers but not tracking performance as done previously. There had been discussions between schools to share experience of blended learning and significant union involvement to ensure the different mechanisms and quality assurance measures were in place. Whilst it had not been as comprehensive as we would have liked, given Covid restrictions, we had endeavoured to put as many quality assurance measures as possible in place.

- Query was made about the Covid recovery plan and the challenges moving forward.

The Deputy Chief Education Officer advised that the well-being of the children was of paramount importance. We would draw on the experience of blended learning and sharing best practices. Childrens' engagement with learning and encouraging them to socialise educationally would be of high importance. Some schools reported behavioural challenges following the lifting of lockdown but we utilised the lessons learnt from the systems that promoted strong learning, such as the blended learning approach that had been really strong. The amount of support provided to schools and the sharing of good practise amongst schools would be built into the new curriculum that was being developed, with well-being at its core.

Whilst we could not comment on the quality of work, we were able to confirm that there had been a significant increase in the number of pupils accessing online learning during the pandemic. Hwb was the platform that most schools used for their learning activities whilst pupils were at home. The available figures showed an increase from approx. 42,000 logins in September 2020 to 141,000 logins in

January 2021 and this was a good indication that pupils were engaging during lockdown periods.

- How has the Council monitored those children who had disengaged with education in school?

The Deputy Chief Education Officer confirmed that there were 207 young people that were known to be home educated and this was double the previous year's figure. To ensure support for those families, the Education Welfare Service would contact them and made annual visits to see what school work they were being asked to do at home. We were working with those families to engage them and attempt to re-engage them into education in school. We had received funding from Welsh Government to increase levels of support and monitoring over the coming year.

Members followed up asking how home schooled children were assessed? It was advised that there was no requirement for those children to follow the national curriculum nor to take any exams or forms of assessment. Whilst some parents chose to enter their children for GCSEs there was no formal requirement for this. Of course if they wanted to progress onto University then they would need to complete the necessary exams. Parents would have to ensure they followed the necessary curriculum, arrange entrance into exams as a private candidate and request a school to act as an exam centre for the child, but this was all up to the parent to arrange.

- How have we ensured the most vulnerable pupils and those with additional learning needs were given as much support as others during the pandemic?

The Assistant Head of Education responded that there had been a grant to set up a health and support team that all schools could access and work with to ensure the well-being of all students as a whole school priority and a toolkit was used to see which interventions were most beneficial to individual learners. Those who were determined to need face to face support were brought into school and there was also online and telephone support provided as well as an educational psychology service help line for parents and carers to access. Looked After Children co-ordinators worked with individual learners to ensure they were supported throughout. There had been constant contact throughout with Head Teachers to look for solutions for any issues that arose for ALN learners.

- Members made comment that they were reassured to hear of the measures that had been put in place and asked if we were prepared for future requests for help.

The Assistant Head of Education replied that this had been flagged up as a significant risk. There had already been an increase in requests for statutory assessments and an increase in behavioural issues had been noted. Recruitment was underway for additional staff within SEN and advisory roles.

- Members asked for an update on the implementation of the weapons in schools policy.

The Deputy Chief Education Officer replied that the managing weapons in schools policy was initially developed as a joint piece of work between the Youth Offending Service and the Inclusion Team, the aim being to ensure a consistent approach across the city to prevent any inappropriate criminalisation of young people, but also to make sure that they and their families were supported in dealing with any issues that had led to them taking a weapon into school in the first instance. The Police had had significant involvement and were a third partner in the scheme. The Policy had been piloted across Secondary schools and would be signed off in the

Autumn. Any significant instance would go down the formal route of criminal involvement but any lesser sanctions taken by school would need to be consistent City wide.

The Committee were pleased to hear that the Weapons scheme was intended to be rolled out to all schools later this year, and voiced the importance of urgent education and awareness to avoid levels of weapon crimes seen in areas like London.

- Following a question on the numbers of pupils being educated out of the City and reasons why, it was stated that the exact figure would be confirmed after the meeting but that there were specific establishments that took pupils from all over the country depending on the specific needs of individuals. Those children with significant physical or specialised needs, sometimes required residential provision and needed to be educated in settings with the necessary specialist adaptations and educational provision.
- What are the challenges and concerns surrounding pupil numbers and catchment areas, specifically with regards to new build housing developments?

The Assistant Head of Education stated the recent alteration in the catchment areas of Caerleon and Somerton had been successful in reducing the numbers of applicants from outside those catchment areas. There had been issues with pupil numbers in Rogerstone following the Jubilee Park development as the projected levelling off of numbers had not materialised but that this would be remodelled going forward, with the hope that Jubilee Park being close to completion would see the numbers of pupils levelling off. In regards to the expansion of Tredegar Park primary school, the pupil projection models indicated that the demand in that area would not manifest as early as expected. The reason for delay was as a result of Planning issues to overcome so alternative ways of utilising the funding were being investigated.

- A member asked if there were concerns regarding projected increased building costs and costing implications quoted by Newport Norse.

Members were advised that cost estimates, which came through from our partners in Newport Norse, indicated that the funding set aside was potentially not enough due to issues arising from both Covid and Brexit, both of which impacted the building trade in one way or another. There was an option to bid to Welsh Government for further funding. The costs of projects were continually monitored and a report to Cabinet at the early part of lockdown last year recommended the removal of some of the lower priority projects in order to concentrate on all of the higher value projects. Within a project both the school and the developer worked together to remove some aspects if it was felt they were not going to provide value for money.

The Committee then asked if it could be arranged for School Governors to receive additional training sessions from Newport Norse in order for them to gain further knowledge on how to utilise providers.

- Members enquired what the position was with the Youth Council and how we ensured the youth voice was being sufficiently heard.

The Assistant Head of Education reassured the Committee that there had been a significant amount of positive work in relation to ensuring the learner's voice was heard. There was good communication between the schools council and youth council and vice versa so that messages were disseminated and information shared. The strong links that existed within the secondary schools now needed to be developed within the junior schools.

The Youth Council had provided some outstanding support for schools over the last year and developed really strong links with senior leaders across schools. They had generated a guidance booklet that had been shared with all schools to support them with the delivery of the LGBTQ Plus curriculum and ideas for activities for supporting young people. They had taken a leading part in the development of the new anti-bullying guidance and the model policy that was circulated to schools and were instrumental in gaining the views of over 100 young people that was integral to that piece of work. The level of communication that they provided to schools had actually increased over the last 12 months.

- Members were concerned that there were currently only around 12 members on the Youth Council and wished to have a wider representation in order to reflect a wider range of opinions.

The Assistant Head of Education responded that the current members were extremely active and had a wider remit than just education issues and that she would ask the Policy and Partnership Team to provide more detailed information on membership and attendance numbers and provide an overview of the other aspects of the Youth Council activities.

The Chair thanked the Deputy Chief Education Officer and the Assistant Heads of Education for their comprehensive responses to Members questions.

4 Conclusion - Comments to the Cabinet

The Committee noted the End of Year Service Plan Report and agreed to forward the minutes to the Cabinet as a summary of the issues raised. The Committee wished to make the following comments to the Cabinet:

- The Committee were very pleased with the quality of the report, and wanted it to be known that all the officers and staff have every right to be proud of their work and ensuring that the services provided have been of good quality throughout one of the most difficult times in living memory.
- The Committee were pleased to hear that the Weapons scheme that is currently being piloted in a Secondary School is intended to be rolled out to all schools later this year, and voiced the importance of urgent education and awareness to avoid levels of weapon crimes seen in areas like London.
- Members were also pleased to hear that the service area are continuing to monitor school's finances as some schools are using their reserves, and welcomed the important work from the service area alongside Finance colleagues being carried out to ensure schools are aware of potential problems for next year.
- The Committee asked if it could be arranged for School Governors to receive additional training sessions from Newport Norse for them to gain further knowledge on how to utilise providers.
- Members queried if the Cabinet Member for Education could agree for an All Member Briefing on the Curriculum for Wales at some point in the future.

- The Committee also asked if they could please get additional information on the following:
 1. Additional information on Calming Rooms in special schools.
 2. The number of children currently being educated out of county, and the reasons why.
 3. Additional information about the School Funding Formula and how it is calculated.
 4. Work that has been recently undertaken by the Youth Council which fall under the People directorate, the current membership and also the maximum amount of members allowed.

4 Scrutiny Adviser Reports

. Forward Work Programme Update

Invitees;

- Neil Barnett – Scrutiny Adviser

The Scrutiny Adviser presented the Forward Work Programme, and informed the Committee of the topics due to be discussed at the next two committee meetings:

Tuesday 21st September 2021

- Children's Residential Care

Tuesday 2nd November 2021

- 2021-22 Service Plan Mid-Year Review for:
 - Children and Young People Services
 - Adult and Community Services

The meeting terminated at 12.07 pm