

Minutes



Performance Scrutiny Committee - People

Date: 28 November 2023

Time: 10.00 am

Present: Councillors W Routley (Chair), J Cleverly, C Townsend, B Davies, P Drewett, D Jenkins, R Howells and D Mayer

In Attendance: Sarah Morgan (Chief Education Officer), Deborah Weston (Assistant Head of Education - Resources), Katy Rees (Assistant Head of Education - Inclusion), Councillor Deb Davies (Cabinet Member for Education and Early Years), Samantha Schanzer (Scrutiny Adviser), Simon Richards (Governance Officer)

Apologies: Councillors P Bright

1 Apologies

Cllr P Bright

2 Declarations of Interest

None.

3 Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of meeting held on **26th September 2023** were **accepted as a true and accurate record.**

4 2023/24 Service Plan Mid-Year Report - Education Services

Invitees:

- Sarah Morgan – Chief Education Officer
- Deborah Weston – Assistant Head of Education – Resources
- Katy Rees - Assistant Head of Education - Inclusion
- Councillor Deborah Davies – Cabinet Member for Education and Early Years

The Cabinet Member for Education and Early Years presented the report to the Committee.

- The Committee asked for the proposed demolition date of Millbrook Primary School. The Assistant Head of Education – Resources informed Committee that the proposal needed to undergo the necessary planning approval and the estimated demolition date was June/July 2024. They assured Committee that additional security measures had been arranged in the interim including CCTV, fencing and guards. The Committee asked for the estimated completion date for the replacement school. The

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Chief Education Officer (CEO) informed Committee that the earliest possible completion date would be January 2026 but could not confirm an exact date at this time. The Committee asked to be kept updated regarding Millbrook Primary School.

- The Committee queried what the 1.2% of Education employees actively learning Welsh equated to numerically. The CEO agreed to provide this information and highlighted that GEMS and Gwent Music employees were included in this. They assured Committee that the same level of support and investment was given to all employees. The Committee asked whether teachers were included in the figure. The CEO stated they were not.
- The Committee asked what the measurable outcome of progress by March 2024 would be in increasing the uptake of Education employees that can speak Welsh. The CEO informed Committee that this would be the increased use of incidental/conversational Welsh. They agreed to provide more information to the Committee.
- The Committee asked whether a link had been identified between poverty, school absence and attainment. The CEO stated that research confirmed the link between attainment and poverty. They informed Committee that they operate practices including the Raising the Attainment of Disadvantaged Youngsters (RADY) approach which had been successful in improving attainment. They explained that there was a link between school absence and poverty, but absence could be seen in all types of families. They explained that the focus was on the progress of learners and looking at all young people's attendance to identify patterns and put support in place where necessary and beneficial.
- The Committee highlighted the use of Fixed Penalty Notices (FPN) to deter school absences and raised concern about the potential impact these could have on disadvantaged families. The CEO assured Committee that work was carried out with schools to explore multiple measures including attendance cluster policies to manage attendance expectations for families, analysing school's data and absence codes to identify patterns, using preventative measures and offering support to families. They assured Committee that FPNs were issued as a last resort and were preceded by many measures and warnings. They agreed that while it was uncomfortable, there was an obligation to ensure children attend school and there was evidence that FPNs are effective in influencing attendance improvement. The Committee asked how many FPNs had been issued. The CEO agreed to provide this data. The Cabinet Member informed Committee that there was a Welsh Government (WG) directive for Local Authorities to start reissuing FPNs and it formed part of the Headteacher's toolkit but they did have discretion. They agreed to keep Committee updated on the progress of this. The Committee asked for evidence to be provided to demonstrate the effectiveness of FPNs. The CEO agreed to do this and explained that they would need to look at pre-Covid figures as they were in the public domain.
- The Committee asked whether attendance was currently actively reported. The CEO informed Committee that it was informal and voluntary currently as there was no WG requirement to report on this. They assured Committee that there was strong collaboration with schools and highlighted that most schools continue to set attendance targets despite it not being statutory. The CEO noted that there were approximately 3 schools who did not set targets but reiterated that they were not required to. They informed Committee that this was ordinarily a statutory requirement, but Primary Headteachers had been in action short of strike and did not have to report. They confirmed that this action had ended in the previous week. They highlighted that they were working in collaboration with Trade Unions and there had

been a national request for a transition period, but that attendance data had been prioritised and would be reported.

- The Committee asked what support was offered to children in poverty and the teachers who support them. The CEO highlighted that there are free breakfast clubs, free school meals and schools have food banks and uniform banks. They informed Committee that roadshows were held to promote other services to parents which could support them outside of Education Services. They highlighted the importance of sharing best practices and funding. They highlighted that there is more support for after school clubs via the Family and Community Engagement (FaCE) Network.
- The Committee raised concern about the cost of branded uniforms and its impact on disadvantaged families and asked whether there was encouragement to allow non-branded uniform to be accepted. The CEO informed Committee that from September 2023, WG changed the duty of governing bodies, who now must give due regard to non-branded uniform. They assured Committee that families in receipt of Universal Credit could access a free school uniform grant for Year 7. The Assistant Head – Resources provided the example of Maindee Primary School, who allow families to purchase up to 3 items of school clothing for £1 each and the money collected supported an onsite food bank. They noted that Maindee Primary School worked closely with New Life in Maesglas who provided surplus uniform to this shop and that there were plans to expand this scheme across Newport. The Cabinet Member explained that some schools provided free feminine hygiene products and these were being utilised. The Committee were pleased to see the work being done. The Committee asked whether they could signpost residents to these schemes and facilities. The CEO informed Committee that they are interested in acquiring waiting lists to ensure that they are reaching as many families as possible and would speak to schools across the city to encourage sign up. The Committee highlighted the environmental importance of pre-loved uniforms. The CEO highlighted that any voluntary supportive work school staff undertook could not be reported on as it was voluntary. The emphasis, instead, was on the goodwill and generosity of spirit of staff to support children in poverty.
- The Committee asked what challenges refugee children were facing in assimilating into schools and what support was being offered to mitigate. The CEO highlighted that temporary accommodation could be difficult for families in knowing which schools to apply for and settle into. They noted that where these families were settled into city centre locations, schools with space to accommodate children may be at a distance and require transport, which could be funded if criteria were met. They noted that additional help could be provided to families who may need further support in this such as an accompanying adult. The CEO emphasised that every child had the right to education and all children were treated in the same regard.
- The Committee noted that progress on the Accessibility Strategy was not moving forward as quickly as intended and asked what was being done. The Assistant Head – Resources informed Committee that there were multiple phases to this Strategy and that they were currently in phase two. They agreed that progress had been slower than hoped due to initial surveys and resourcing issues, but delivery had not come to a standstill. They noted that there was overlap between this Strategy and WG capital grants for Additional Learning Needs (ALN) which meant that time limited grants could be redistributed to support other work. They highlighted that there had been significant improvement even if it had not been reflected in this point. The Committee asked what resourcing issues they had encountered. The Assistant Head noted that this was a project they were keen to progress but the project management team must prioritise projects across the capital estate, according to greatest need and assured Committee they were in constant communication. The CEO reiterated that some grants were time limited.

- The Committee asked whether there was research to support links between Free School Meals and improved attainment and were there plans to roll out Free School Meals to Secondary Education. The CEO noted that they had not received any news about further roll out and they personally hadn't seen any research to this end but felt that WG would be aware of and use this research to inform decisions.
- The Committee congratulated the team on their successes and thanked Officers for attending.

5 Conclusions of Committee Reports

- The Committee congratulated Officers for their work and the successes within the report.
- The Committee welcomed the universal rollout of free school meals to all primary schools and acknowledged the positive impact of changing the terminology from "Free School Meals" to "Universal Free School Meals".
- The Committee requested the figure for the 1.2% of Education employees actively engaged in learning Welsh.
- The Committee requested information on how many Fixed Penalty Notices had been issued and evidence of Fixed Penalty Notices' effectiveness.
- The Committee requested to be updated on the figures related to school non-attendance.
- The Committee requested an update on the demolition of Millbrook Primary School closer to the time of demolition.
- The Committee requested further information on Welsh Language in schools and the work being done to encourage Welsh Language in English medium schools.

6 Scrutiny Adviser Reports

a. Actions Arising (Appendix 1)

The Scrutiny Advisor noted no change in the Actions Sheet.

b. Forward Work Programme Update (Appendix 2)

The Scrutiny Advisor noted no change in the Forward Work Programme at this time. The Scrutiny Advisor noted that the date of the next meeting was the 12th December 2023.

7 **Live Event**

[To watch the recording, please click here.](#)