

Minutes



Performance Scrutiny Committee - People

Date: 17 November 2020

Time: 10.00 am

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

In Attendance: Sarah Morgan (Chief Education Officer), Andrew Powles (Assistant Head of Education - Engagement and Learning), Katy Rees (Assistant Head of Education - Inclusion), Deborah Weston (Service Development Manager) and Neil Barnett (Scrutiny Adviser)

1 Apologies

Councillors Stephen Marshall and William Routley

2 Declarations of Interest

Page 17, Item 7 Councillor Trevor Watkins declared an interest as Chair of Governors of Tredegar Park School

3 2020/21 Service Plan Mid-Year Reviews

Attendees –

- Sarah Morgan - Head of Education
- Andrew Powell - Deputy Chief Education Officer
- Deborah Weston - Service Manager Resources
- Katie Rees - Assistant Head of Education- Inclusion

The Cabinet Member for Education introduced the report and reported that the Education Service continued to develop and deliver effective leadership and provision, which had been reflected in the response of the service to the Covid 19 pandemic. Central Education worked with schools to provide childcare and support for children of critical workers and to vulnerable learners. In September 2020 schools reopened in line with Newport City Council recovery objectives and Welsh Government guidance linked to school operations and the development of blended learning. Central teams had continued to work with individual schools to review school finances and ensure value for money.

Members asked the following:

- What was the situation regarding the grant provision for GEMS?

The Head of Education explained that throughout Wales, including Newport, the Council were allowed a grant for supporting pupils of GRT background or who had English as an additional language. Welsh Government had announced that the

calculation of the grant would be reviewed and we were therefore expecting a reduction in WG contribution. This was expected to cause issues as we would be unable to support our current levels of staffing in this area, currently 100 % supported by grant income. However, in light of Covid, this recalculation had been delayed so we had managed to continue for now with the same level of grant. Head of Education said we had a good representation on the working party for Welsh Government and so hoped additional money would come through the system

- A member asked if attendance levels had dropped significantly during the period of the pandemic

The Deputy Chief Education Officer reported that attendance levels were very low at the start of September but had increased steadily up to half term in October, with the best attendance rate being around 83%. Although levels were still much lower than pre-Covid, we were 9th in ranking of the 22 Local Authorities. A media campaign had been launched to encourage families to send their children back to school but at the moment we were still not allowed to issue fines for non-attendance.

- A member asked what measures were being taken to support Additional Learning Needs (ALN) children and to ensure that all schools were operating 'on an equal playing field'

The Assistant Head of Education (Inclusion) responded that at the start of lockdown the Service worked with all schools to complete risk assessments for vulnerable pupils to ensure they were tracked and supported. Throughout the Summer a helpline was available to provide extra support to ensure pupils weren't dropping behind. Also set up were education psychologist support groups to ensure any pupil with ALN needs had their well being and learning checked. There had also been a grant to set up a health and support team that all schools could access and work with to ensure well being of all students as a whole school priority.

Sencom resources were utilised for pupils with sight/hearing difficulties to ensure they were supported and bespoke packages were investigated for those pupils with particularly complex needs. Counselling services were expanded for vulnerable learners with additional funding to expand this service and this was also offered to families as well as pupils. Autism outreach service had also been launched.

Throughout lockdown the SEN panel continued to work to ensure up to date advice and support had been available and the Educational Welfare Officers had continued to work from the Hubs to provide support to families of vulnerable children and carry out welfare checks etc. Educational psychologists were also available to provide additional support and advice to both staff and pupils. Since September those risk assessments that had been completed remotely were checked back on site to ensure that the right levels and type of support had been put in place. There had been constant contact throughout with Head Teachers to look for solutions for any issues that arose for ALN learners.

- The Head of Education Services reported that the teaching profession had worked very hard during lockdown period to ensure schools had right platforms, such as google classroom, to provide consistency. Over the summer, there had been co-ordination of all schools on how to teach, present and contact remotely. The Summer period was time for catching up and checking and the Autumn period time for refining and improving. The Service had just sent out a blended learning survey to all schools

in Newport to find out exactly what plans were now in place in case any further instances of lockdown were to be imposed. Moving forward there was a need to check that all schools had their quality assurance plans in place for blended learning and this would be checked to ensure a level of consistency across all Newport schools.

- A member queried if sufficient equipment had been issued across the City to all learners and how were those being home schooled monitored?

The Head of Education responded that a definitive reply could not be provided as it was up to each school to provide that. However, 800 reconditioned laptops and 3000 MiFi units had been loaned out and a large order for additional laptops had been made, but as demand was so great nationally, it was not expected that this order would be received for quite a few months yet. Approaches had been made to local businesses to source any surplus stock that could be donated and reconditioned for school use. Dialogue continued with schools to ensure that any pupil unable to access appropriate technology had access to printed resource packs.

The Head of Education Services explained that during the pandemic some families had chosen to home school due to high anxiety issues and we had had to make sure the families understood the consequences of them not having the resources provided to them such as blended learning and information packs. In normal circumstances, once they electively chose to home school than they would lose a place on the school register and need to reapply should they wish to re-enter the school system. During a period of isolation or circuit break the authority was able to provide short term assistance with learning but if it was the parent's choice to continue for a longer period of time then we did not have the resources and are not required to provide long term assistance. Education welfare offices carried out an annual check on those children but the Local Authority was not sufficiently resourced to carry out more detailed checks on those children who were electively home schooled. The parents effectively took on the role of ensuring the education provision of the child, and they took over the role of the local authority in that respect.

- Members asked if there were any major issues anticipated towards the end of the year with the budget and to outline the current situation with schools in deficit.

The Deputy Chief Education Officer commented that Secondary school finances had been a concern for a while. Five independent reviews had been completed by internal teams, BIP and supplemented by an independent expert. These focussed on secondary schools with significant deficits and assessed value for money. The reports noted that whilst it felt that some schools were addressing all aspects of issues appropriately and no changes were needed, others recommended schools reviewed their teaching and learning methods and some recommended a review of their leadership structures. Following a further question asking how many schools were either in debt or at risk of deficit, the Head of Education stated that she believed the numbers were currently 5 Secondary and 3 Primary schools in that position. However, although deficit remained, many had resolved their in- year deficit by taking on board recommendations thus preventing the accumulation of further debt. It was difficult to predict those at future risk because of the way schools utilised their budget. Schools may have been in a good position and could utilise their savings for a period of time, but once that saving was used, they would have to recognize that level of spending could not continue. In relation to the budget at the year end, it was envisaged that all indicators would be green by that time. In terms of risk, this would be down to Welsh Government funding and decisions taken by Cabinet.

Cabinet member Giles left the meeting at this point.

The Head of Education stated that although schools were attempting to reduce their deficits, this did not necessarily mean teaching staff redundancies. The Service Area were able to look at best practice and provide schools with ideas how to best balance their books and this could be looking at goods and services, contracts etc. When asked if Newport was the worst funded Authority in Wales, the Head of Education stated that this statement was incorrect and that in her professional opinion the data was skewed by the use of ambiguous and out of date benchmarking data and that Newport was in fact, not as disadvantaged as the Welsh Government tables appeared to show.

- A member asked about the action plan and mitigation measures regarding school place pressures.

The Service Manager for Resources reassured members that there were enough spaces across the City but that they were not necessarily in the areas where there was most parental demand. There was an allocation working group that specifically monitored demand and they worked with other Departments such as Planning to ensure that sufficient Section 106 funding was agreed before new housing developments commenced. She added that a consultation had just finished into proposals to increase capacity at Bassaleg school where demand was high. They could also amend catchment areas when and where necessary.

- A member asked what was in place to support the mental health of children and staff.

The Head of Education stated that for all staff the Care First service was available together with occupational health referrals when required and the National Academy for Leadership provided headteachers support. The senior leadership team were on hand to provide any additional support and advice as needed. Meetings were held with a large group of headteacher groups on a regular basis to provide information and to discuss issues such as PPE, face coverings, school transport, cleaning etc. All school staff had been incredible during this period which had been critical to maintain learning. The Assistant Head of Education- Inclusion added that they had received extra funding from Welsh Government to expand the counselling service for young people. They had in place drop in video and chats facility, virtual community counselling, telephone counselling services for both parents and pupils. Educational psychologists also met with staff to identify individual needs and provide support.

- A member asked who was responsible for specifying the size of 'bubbles' within schools and the legitimacy of any isolation measures

The Head of Education responded that the schools themselves determined the bubble size. It was easier in the primary setting to have smaller bubbles but more difficult in secondary schools where there were such large numbers of pupils needing specialist teaching by subject. Welsh Government had verified that it was legitimate to have the whole of a year group as a bubble but this of course was a double-edged sword. Whilst it meant that the pupils were able to have a broad and balanced curriculum with specialist teaching and regular breaks, if the Track, Trace and Protect process identified a positive case, then the whole year group needed to isolate. The schools were doing the best they could with the risk assessments put in place in order to provide as much teaching continuity as they could during these times.

The Head of Service confirmed her support for the TTP measures and advised that the Council were bound to follow the rules imposed by WG regarding isolations periods, face coverings etc. With 370 different year groups across secondary schools, the previous week there had been 16 in self isolation. It was unfortunate that some schools seemed to have more instances of positive cases than others but it was out

of anyone's control. Headteachers were aware of parents frustrations but under the circumstances could not see any other way of providing the service they would want to by introducing smaller contact groups.

- The Committee asked for an update on Policies originally scheduled for implementation by the Autumn -

Self Harm and Suicide Protocol –Newport was part of a regional working party on this. It was currently with Environmental Health to finalise their relevant parts and then it would be ready to release.

Safeguarding for Staff Training – as this was a standard programme provided online, all relevant staff were able to complete the necessary training modules

Weapons Policy – awaiting final feedback for the Police Service on certain points, however everything previously piloted was now in use and the guidelines were in place which schools were now following.

The Chair thanked the Head of Education for her report and information provided to the Committee and on behalf of all members present asked that their sincere appreciation be passed on to all staff working in the Schools and throughout the Service Area for their hard work and dedication during the Covid crisis.

Conclusion - Comments to the Cabinet

The Committee noted the Mid-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:

1. The Committee recognised the challenges faced by the Education Service during the pandemic and applauded the continuity of service during this challenging period.
2. The committee wished to investigate further the Youth Council and the Youth Justice Service and learn how they had been operating during the pandemic period in particular.
3. The Committee wished to receive a headline report on the results of the survey into the plan for blended learning

4 Forward Work Programme Update

Invitees

- Neil Barnett – **Governance Officer**

The officer presented the Forward Work Programme, and informed the Committee of the topics due to be discussed at the next committee meeting:

19th January 2021/22

- Draft Budget Proposals

The meeting terminated at 12.30 pm