

Minutes



Performance Scrutiny Committee - People

Date: 30 November 2021

Time: 10.00 am

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

In Attendance: Karyn Keane (Assistant Head of Education - Engagement & Learning), Sarah Morgan (Chief Education Officer), Katy Rees (Assistant Head of Education - Inclusion), Deborah Weston (Service Development Manager), Connor Hall (Scrutiny Adviser), Samantha Schanzer and Louise A Thomas (Governance Officer)

Apologies: Andrew Powles (Deputy Chief Education Officer)

1 Apologies

Andrew Powles, Deputy Chief Education Officer

2 Declarations of Interest

None.

3 Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting were accepted as a true and accurate record.

4 Education Mid-Year Reviews

The Head of Education introduced the report and reported that the Education Service continued to develop and progress, even given the backdrop of response of the service to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The report showed that out of the actions detailed, 76 were currently on track to be completed by the end of the financial year and measured as 'green', with a minimal number of 4 as 'red'. Since the publishing of the report, further progressions had been made and the Service was in an even better position.

Members asked the following:

-Why was there a projected underspend of 5%?

The Head of Education explained that this figure equated to £1 million and was primarily linked to Out of County placements. Against the backdrop of the pandemic, it had been difficult to identify children that needed this provision. Newport City Council had also tried to

keep children with complex needs closer to home for their education which also reduced costs. Going forward there was a likelihood there would be greater need for support for those children so the underspend was unlikely to be an ongoing trend.

- How frequently was the risk map reviewed?

The Head of Education commented that senior leadership team meetings were held on a weekly basis and a regular topic was the escalation of risks, but the risk map was discussed specifically twice a year. Whilst some identified risks such as ALN support and demand were forecast, others had lessened, for example GEMS spend as there were skills and expertise within schools to continue this support. The risks around the 21st Century schools continued due to ongoing price increases and although Newport City Council had enough surplus spaces within our schools, these were not within every community, meaning Newport City Council could not necessarily offer places within a 2-mile radius which would remain a cost risk for the time being.

- What measures were being taken to support Additional Learning Needs (ALN) children?

The Head of Education 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. ALN support was assessed on a gradient depending on the needs of the child. When additional needs were identified, Newport City Council were able to provide a range of support, sometimes at school level ranging from extra time or additional work or it could be provided at a local learning resource base. Newport City Council could consider out of town provision and had provision mapping set up in all of our schools which ensured that all children in mainstream education had a universal entitlement to support their needs. The Local Authority could see the whole of the provision across all of its schools and see with confidence that pupils were supported at school level and within various specialist provisions across the city.

- How were Safe Routes to School being monitored, and what was being done to encourage active travel to school?

The exercise that was referred to in the Service Plan which impacted school admissions and the home to school transport policy sat within the Education Service. However, Safe routes to School actually sat within City Services' remit. Meetings held with City Services established that Safe Routes to School was long term piece of work.

Education Service still wanted to push the initiative forward because it recognised the importance for children as young citizens to be able to see the importance of walking to school whenever possible. Being mindful of the pressures on schools over the last 2 years, monitoring of modes of transport had not been requested but for future consideration schools could complete their own surveys on how their children got to school, and that could be a helpful benchmark for trying to promote walking to school. Also, an Active Travel Survey had been sent to all schools earlier that term and the results could be reported back at a future meeting.

- What were the procedures and provisions for ALN children in the transition from Primary to secondary school?

The Head of Inclusion stated that the introduction of the new ALN Transformation Act would ensure greater levels of competence in the identification of children with additional learning needs. Introduced in every school was a key electronic system which was a tool that allowed monitoring and all information gathered on any pupil could be transferred to the next school at the press of a button. All young people in any one school should have a one page profile and if there were any further needs identified these should be included. This information could be easily transferred between schools.

The Head of Inclusion explained that whilst there would inevitably be variation in the provision across schools, they tried to ensure continuity of support across the schools. 2 teacher advisors worked across transition and provided quality assurance based work to make sure there was consistency across all schools and close any gaps in the quality of provision.

-The Chair asked for an explanation behind the red indicator against the ALN transformation.

The Cabinet Member for Education explained that implementation delays were due to Welsh Government being behind in issuing guidance to Local Authorities due to COVID issues taking priority. The Cabinet Member however, attended monthly meetings with Welsh Government and the Welsh Local Government Association where this was on the agenda and discussed in relation to its implementation and issues around costs discussed. There were also frequent email conversations with other Cabinet members across Wales in relation to this and at the same time, Senior officers with the Education Service were having those same conversations with their contacts with Welsh Government. Regardless of political backgrounds across Wales there was one voice in relation to getting this delivered and implemented as soon as possible.

-How confident were Newport City Council with the introduction of the new curriculum?

The Head of Education responded that Newport City Council needed a quality assurance methodology to make sure that Newport City Council were on track to fully provide the new curriculum. In the background, Newport City Council had some basic checks so Newport City Council knew the professional learning was being offered and we'd listened to school development planning sessions to see what plans were in place. Head Teachers were being questioned on a rolling programme over the course of the year. Originally, schools were due to provide their specific evidence of readiness this Autumn term but due to workforce issues within schools it was not felt appropriate at this time and so this readiness survey had been pushed back into the coming Spring term.

-When were schools in deficit expected to return to a balanced budget?

The Head of Education explained that monitoring meetings were being held and it was not known precisely where Newport City Council were in terms of deficit recovery but this information would be available for the end of year service plan review. The aim was for all schools to be in a balanced or surplus position within 3 years but that any potential changes were tracked and factored into recovery in a timely manner and therefore flexibility was also important.

- What education was provided to children learning from home during the pandemic?

The Head of Education explained that during school closures the Service worked with schools in the provision of blended working. Focus was on professional learning and upskilling teachers to provide digital learning and best practice was shared among schools. Together with EAS, a website was set up across the whole region so that all schools could access and maximise the opportunities. Head Teachers held themselves to account to do their best to respond to children's demands and listen to parents and pupils via surveys.

- How did the Council monitor children who were permanently home educated?

The Head of Education and Learning explained that the numbers of children who were home educated had grown. Prior to the epidemic, the LA had limited resources to manage effective home education and the numbers had since increased, for a number of reasons, and this placed added pressures in monitoring.

When notified by a parent that they intended to provide homeschooling, an Education Welfare Officer made contact with the family within 10 days to ensure that the parent understood the ramifications of that choice. The EWO would subsequently make at least one

annual visit. A small grant this year had funded additional staffing and resources and Newport City Council had been able to appoint a Family Liaison Officer specifically to work with electively home educated children. Also 2 additional days for an Educational welfare Officer post which allowed a small increase in the frequency of engagement with families including organised group activities for families where they indicated the need for emotional support together with information in the expressive arts curriculum such as music and drama together with science activities and career advice. In response, there had been a series of well-being and science days, Dragon's team events and a careers event for the older learners to discuss their 16+ destination aspirations.

- How many children were home educated? And what were the numbers of exclusions within NCC's education system?

It was difficult to know the exact numbers of home educations due to the amount of churn in the numbers of young people. There appeared to be young people who were home educated for a shorter period of time and then returned to school as well as young people who were in school and then moved out. There were 185 children who were known to be home educated on the 30th of September but those were not necessarily the same 185 children who were recorded in the census that took place in January of this year.

Following COVID, increased changes of behaviour in young people had been noted. The return to the formal school setting and its necessary restrictions proved difficult for some young people to manage. This necessitated a combination of support, bespoke conversations and additional teacher advisor support. There was a challenging time ahead with the effects of lack of socialisation and lack of boundaries at home yet to be tackled. Excluded pupils attended the pupil referral unit where they received specialist support such as anger management classes, mindfulness lessons etc. As a corporate parent Newport City Council still had to ensure robust learning to ensure these pupils had the best possible academic outcomes.

-In response to 'red' measures queried by the Chair, the Head of Education responded that the reviews of calming rooms would be completed by 31st March 2022. The reason for the delay was the requirement for Health & Safety back up to ensure they were used correctly. There had been a backlog of some training but this had been commissioned out to some areas to alleviate the health and safety team of this task.

-In response to the red indicator on developing a strategy for the transition of vulnerable groups, the Head of Education explained that Newport City Council worked in collaboration with non-maintained settings such as private nurseries. We were unable to make demands to attend specific professional learning and collaboration sessions, particularly as they had been affected themselves with staffing issues during the pandemic. The nurseries would of course still have their duty of care and statutory courses such as Safeguarding to attend and so they would prioritise accordingly. This target would probably therefore be delayed into the next Service Plan.

The Chair thanked the Officers and Cabinet Member for attending and answering the questions posed by the Scrutiny Committee.

The Cabinet Member for Education added her thanks and praise for all education officers and teaching staff across Newport for their hard work and focus on the delivery of targets. Despite the exceptionally difficult circumstances, Education Services had displayed true leadership and had been supportive and shown an empathetic approach to schools at this time.

5 Conclusions of Committee Reports

The Committee wished to make the following comments:

Comments and Recommendations

- Safe walking routes to school (page 24): It was noted that Education had taken this as far as they could, and that the responsibility for furthering this would now lie with City Services. The Members would like the initiative to be added to City Services' Service Plan going forward so that it can be further scrutinised.
- The Members wanted further information sent on the number of children excluded from schools.
- The Members shared their concerns for the number of children being excluded.
- The Members were concerned that any issues with regards to ALN and vulnerable children tended to be in red/amber measures. They noted that this may be something they would like added to the Forward Work Programme in future.
- The Members expressed concern with regards to the estimated completion date of the calming room audits, and would like to be updated on progress in future.
- The Committee thanked officers for their hard work within Education.

6 Scrutiny Adviser Reports

The Scrutiny Adviser shared with Committee the Forward Work Programme with the caveat that some changes may have to be made, as well as updates on the actions from the previous meeting.

The meeting terminated at 11.50 am