

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Children and Young People Select Committee held
at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr, Usk, NP15 1GA on Thursday, 17th May,
2018 at 10.00 am

PRESENT: County Councillor M.Groucutt (Chairman)
County Councillor L.Jones (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: L.Brown, D. Jones, M.Lane, M. Powell,
T.Thomas, J.Watkins and S. Woodhouse

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Will McLean	Chief Officer for Children and Young People
Nikki Wellington	Finance Manager
Hazel Ilett	Scrutiny Manager
Wendy Barnard	Democratic Services Officer
Roger Hoggins	Head of Operations
Paul Keeble	Group Engineer (Highways and Flood Management)
Pauline Batty	Catering Manager
Geraint Roberts	Road Safety Officer

ALSO PRESENT:

Mike Fowler Parent Governor Representative

APOLOGIES:

Dr. A. Daly

1. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

2. Public Open Forum

No members of the public were present.

3. Confirmation of minutes.

The minutes of the meeting held on the 20th March 2018 were confirmed and signed by the Chair.

4. Managing School Meal Debt

Context:

This report discusses how chargeable services such as school meals are now paid for and examines how the issue of debt should be approached by the authority.

Key Issues:

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Approximately 50% of parents and guardians choose to pay for their child/children to receive school meals. The service is paid for using 'Parent Pay' software available on the school website. Other children will either bring packed lunches or be entitled to free school meals.

The system will allow parents to pay for a range of services including Breakfast Club (a charge is being introduced in September) and school trips although at present it is used only for school meals. Parents pay for services by crediting the account.

Occasionally an account will move into debt. Often this will be an oversight on behalf of the parent and currently a letter advising the parent is sent after debt is accrued to the value of 5 school meals.

Whilst the account remains in debt a further two letters are sent to the parent.

If the debt remains outstanding after attempts to recover the debt then at the discretion of the school the debt is written off. The loss of income is presently accounted for on the school account although the income for the service is credited to the school meals budget which lies within the Operations department budget.

Some headteachers have asked how an outstanding debt should be resolved and in particular should the child continue to receive a school meal when the parent/guardian has received advice that the debt exists and remains outstanding.

Whilst on the face of it the decision would appear to be withdrawal of service due to non-payment the issues for the welfare of the child must be taken into account.

Withdrawal of service could result in the child receiving no food at lunchtime which is detrimental to the child's welfare although the counter argument can be made that the parent/guardian is responsible for the child's welfare and taking a school meal is discretionary.

Member Scrutiny:

- It is important to understand the reasons for the debt occurring e.g. technological or financial problems.
- Whilst accepting the need to manage the debt, a Select Committee Member strongly emphasised that no child should be made to feel different by not being fed or being provided with a different meal.
- It was suggested that additional steps could be added to the recommendations:
 - 1) Asking the school to investigate; and
 - 2) The school could send out a general letter regarding debt overall with contact detail where help can be provided.
- There should be no variation between schools and where there is, the reasons should be explored. It was explained that schools are already contacting parents/guardians by phone and they are seeking a consistent approach to help them manage debt.
- It was explained that the School Meals Service is managed by the LA not by individual schools. Income is received by the LA but debt currently is the responsibility of the school. It was queried if responsibility for the debt could be passed to the LA to relieve pressure on schools.

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- It was acknowledged that schools and their administrators know their parents best and have an awareness of mitigating reasons. However, if there were lots of cases to pursue, this could add to school administrators' already heavy workloads and suggested that after initial chasing the matter should be handed to the LA.
- The benefits to parents of the ParentPay system were explained e.g. to set a reminder to review payments.
- A Member agreed there should be a balanced approach and the matter should be dealt with sensitively mentioning, in particular, those families who are outside the Free School Meal limit and just about managing. It was suggested that Headteachers are best placed to make decisions on debt.
- In response to a question raised about the effect of the introduction of ParentPay on debt levels. It was agreed that the level of debt before and after its introduction would be looked at to see if an increase is identifiable. The benefits of the ParentPay system were explained e.g. convenience, secure and audit compliant.
- It was questioned how many schools have asked for a consistent approach, how the others are managing and if the schools managing well were involved in putting the recommendations together. The Chief Officer explained that the issue had been raised by Headteachers who were concerned about provision of meals and the amount of time taken to chase debt by the administrator. It was added that there is a range of schools with debt with no particularly consistent reasons.
- The Cabinet Member for Social Care, Safeguarding and Health supported the view that debts should return to the LA whilst retaining the first contact by the school to attempt to recover the debt. It was advocated that every case is dealt with on an individual basis and that, in terms of safeguarding, there was no question of a cut-off point or making a child feel different.

Committee Conclusions:

The recommendations in the report were accepted with the addition that an appropriate form of words is added to the guidance to state that the first line of contact is the school plus the inclusion of contact details to offer help and support. The Committee noted that schools had different practices to address school meal debt and was clear that there should be no discrimination against any child because of parents' debt, and that message should be fed back to Headteachers and they should all follow the guidance, especially to those who have previously not used that approach.

The Chair concluded that the recommendations set out a range of sensible suggestions and the addition was agreed that the school should try to resolve the matter before handing it over to the Local Authority.

5. Kerbcraft Update

Context:

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At the CYP Select Committee meeting on the 7th December 2017 members agreed to receive six monthly reports on the performance of the Kerbcraft service, consider if the service is operating satisfactorily based upon the information placed before the committee and consider what further information, if any, they may wish to receive at future meetings.

Key Issues:

The December report provided the background to why this report is presented to members of the CYP Select Committee but in summary the ongoing monitoring of performance is part of an action plan adopted by the authority in response to an adverse report from WAO about the performance of the kerbcraft service and safeguarding risks associated with the provision of the service.

Member Scrutiny:

- The Select Committee received a presentation from the Road Safety Officer. The Vice Chair thanked the Officer for his presentation and for the service; schools and children like the programme and learn safety.
- It was commented that Kerbcraft Plus is a welcome addition to the scheme.
- Concern was expressed by the committee about 'Red' category schools that haven't taken up the scheme. The example of one 'Red' school in a built up area that has not taken up the scheme was provided noting that the school and children would benefit from participating. The Committee was interested in how to encourage such schools to participate. The Officer agreed, is looking to address the position as soon as possible and plans to promote the scheme via case studies to show what has happened this year, and also through a road safety Twitter account . The suggestion that the Chief Officer or Head of Operations write to Red category schools that have not taken up the scheme was welcomed.
- A Member commented that it was a lifesaving scheme and drew attention to rural schools where there are sometimes no pavements, and queried if there were any arrangements to transport children to more built up areas to enable them to practice kerb craft skills and to participate in Kerbcraft Plus in a busier environment whilst also providing skills relevant to rural locations e.g. walking on and crossing rural roads. The Group Engineer (Highways and Flood Management) explained that previously minibuses were used to transfer rural school children to an urban environment and this plan would be revisited.
- A Member asked how the use of volunteers was working and if there had been much turnover and it was responded that the scheme is currently manageable with five volunteers and is working well. The risk assessment states that there will not be more than seven volunteers. There has only been one new volunteer lately with interest from others. Consideration is in progress if they are right for the programme and can offer commitment and consistency.
- A Member reiterated how very much the work is appreciated and asked how much the commitment for volunteers is, as it might be possible to provide some names to help.

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- It was also questioned why some schools couldn't accommodate the scheme and responded that often mornings are taken up with core subjects and there is no staff capacity to only offer afternoons. Some schools really value the programme and make the time available, but every effort is made to accommodate requests where possible.

Committee Conclusions:

The Chair thanked officers for their contribution to the meeting noting that it is 12 months since steps were taken to place the Kerbcraft scheme on a safer footing. Referring to the testimony of Committee Members, the Chair commended all involved in the improved status of the scheme's effectiveness and asked that the message is passed on to staff.

The recommendations contained in the report were unanimously agreed and in particular the proposal that 6 monthly monitoring will no longer be required. The Committee is happy with the safeguarding elements and the way the scheme is being run generally.

Clarification was provided by the Chair that, from this point, there would be an annual report to this Committee. Specific questions about schools and take up of the scheme will require verbal responses as required.

6. Additional Learning Needs

Context:

The Chief Officer, Children and Young People, provided the Select Committee with a verbal report regarding a review of Additional Learning Needs for which consultation is currently in progress.

Key Issues:

Consultation sessions are ongoing with staff, governors, parents and members of the public at schools. Written opinions are also being received and considered. Comments so far include:

Staff:

- Employment concerns for which reassurance has been given regarding protection of employment and the likelihood that this will be a developing service; and
- How responsibility and accountability will be organised on site noting that this is consultation on the model only and this level of detail would be co-produced with schools further on in the process; the underpinning principle being much clearer regarding entry and exit criteria.

Governors:

- Also concerns around responsibility and accountability;
- Supportive of development and recognise the need to change; and
- They welcome that the model proposed is not new and is similar to Trinity Fields School and Resource Centre (Caerphilly CBC) and Maes Ebbw School (Newport CC) are similar and provide assurance of success.

Parents:

- Initial misunderstanding of the intentions has been resolved and reassurance provided;
- Parents of children with moderate learning needs provision have expressed concern regarding the focus of new legislation and expected code of practice which states that such needs are to be met to a far greater extent within mainstream; and

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- A shortfall of the proposed model is that currently the secondary Special Needs Resource Bases (SNRBs) are predominantly for students with moderate learning needs. Primary SNRBs have a much broader range of designations. In essence, there is too much specific provision and insufficient broader provision. Work will be undertaken with schools within a sliding scale to accommodate a child's needs.

The public meetings continue and responses will be reported back to Cabinet on 3rd July 2018. If Cabinet agree, statutory notices will be posted from September (with a 28 day objection period) and then a final decision will be taken by Cabinet on 7th November 2018.

Member Scrutiny:

A Member reported that her local community council had been positive about the proposals, and also stated that pupils of Mounton House Special School were also positive about the school at an open evening and welcomed reassurance that their education would continue and that, with hindsight, the consultation document should have made this point clearer.

Assurance was sought about:

- the mixed age range and gender of pupils at the school, the practicalities of arranging education for primary and secondary age students plus how the Pupil Referral Unit and SEBD unit would operate on the same site;
- Security on site with the suggestion of a fob system instead of keys to lock/separate different areas;
- Timescales available between the April and September 2019 to make the necessary changes to the layout of the building; and
- The impact of the loss of revenue from out of county students.

The Chief Officer responded:

- That fobs will be considered as part of the investment in the site to accommodate the age range and mixed genders;
- Regarding timescales, the SEBD provision won't start until September 2019. It was acknowledged that the existing students were reassured that their education would continue at Mounton House and the students present at the consultation event were in favour of the extension of the age range to 19 noting that whilst there is post 16 provision available at Coleg Gwent which is out of county, provision will be developed at the new unit at Caldicot where there are 5 post 16 places.
- Considering potential loss of income, 25 of the current 33 students are from out of county (only 3 are residential). It has been made clear to out of county partners that the school will continue as a day school and the children won't be moved from their placement. Assurance was provided that no child would be moved from a setting where they are settled, or where a move would not be in their best interests. What had not been taken into account in the financial modelling is in circumstances where a child would come back from their current provision. It was confirmed that the model would see gradual implementation over a long period of time.
- That there is a lot of space on site to accommodate pupils of mixed age range and gender, and safeguarding is of paramount importance. Physical management of the site will be a key aspect of working with mixed gender and age ranges plus staff skills.
- Every school has been visited to undertake pupil voice events to engage with pupils and seek views on e.g. Wellbeing.

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The Member referred to the gradual implementation and sought further assurance regarding the changes to the layout being completed to accommodate the variety of needs, ages and gender in time for their arrival.

A Member asked for clarification of the term moderate learning difficulties, and questioned future provision at primary and secondary level. Assurance was provided that current provision would remain and funding related to a statement or School Action Plus Resourced Agreement (SAPRA) would remain in place. The funding may be used more innovatively e.g. a teaching assistant for a small group instead of one to one. A definition of moderate learning needs was provided. It is anticipated that children with moderate learning difficulties would be educated with an integrated approach in main stream with some time spent at the SNRB. Entry and exit

Committee Conclusion:

The Committee noted and accepted the report and thanked the Chief Officer for the opportunity to participate during the consultation period.

The Select Committee asked that the minutes of the discussion are added to the consultation responses.

criteria will be well defined at the earliest opportunity.

7. Transfer of Free School Meal Entitlement Assessment from Education to Revenues and Benefits

Context:

This report proposes the transfer for the assessment of free school meals (FSM) to the shared benefit service operated by Torfaen County Borough Council for a two-year trial.

To scrutinise the proposal to transfer the assessment of FSM to the shared benefit service for a two year period from 1st September 2018.

To note the cost of this is £15,500 per annum, this will be paid to Torfaen County Borough Council for the provision of this service. This will be funded by an existing vacancy.

Key Issues:

Currently the assessment for FSM pupils is carried out by the School and Student Access Team within the Children and Young People Directorate.

The criteria for entitlement for FSM is determined by the Welsh Government for all of Wales and the assessments are made in line with these.

The current arrangement for assessing Monmouthshire resident benefits entitlement is carried out by Torfaen County Borough Council as part of a shared service arrangement.

During 2017-18 Torfaen County Borough Council moved their assessment of FSM from education to the shared benefit service and as a result they have seen an increase in entitlement of FSM by 20%. On their assessment, 50% of this was due to the roll out of

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Universal Credit and 50% due to the targeting of families that are entitled to FSM but not claiming.

Proposed changes:

The proposal is to transfer the assessment for FSM for Monmouthshire County Council residents to the share benefit service operated by Torfaen County Borough Council.

The benefit of this is that through the shared service Torfaen would be able to review and target the relevant families to make them aware of their entitlement and the benefits that offers. With the aim to increase the take up of FSM in Monmouthshire to reduce the cost burden to families.

This will over time see increased income to the Revenue Settlement Grant for Monmouthshire, and see an increase in grants offered to schools.

There will be an increase in the catering budget to provide that FSM, however, the benefits are likely to outweigh any additional costs.

All of our schools ensure that processes are in place to ensure that pupils claiming FSM are not identified by peers to minimise any stigma attached to this.

Grants such as the Pupil Development Grant are directly distribute to school using FSM data from Welsh Government.

The service will be managed by a Service Level Agreement similar to the one offered for the current shared service with clear criteria agreed between the parties.

All the compliance for GDPR will be undertaken by Torfaen County Borough Council, through an information sharing agreement, any costs of this, and any cost of engaging with the households will be picked by Torfaen County Borough Council.

Member scrutiny:

The CYO Finance Manager introduced the report and the Chief Officer, Children and Young People provided further information as follows:

- For this year, Welsh Government will be awarding Pupil Deprivation Grant funding in respect of eligible Free School Meal pupils from the last two years using 2017 Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) data. Schools, especially those in areas of higher deprivation, have expressed concern that this criteria is disadvantaging them e.g. 40 pupils in 2017 and 100 in 2018 in one school.
- A letter has been received today from Welsh Government regarding the increasing impact of Universal Credit. The inclusion of Universal Credit as a determining factor for eligibility for Free School Meals was an interim measure. New criteria options are under consideration referencing an earned income threshold for recipients. It was emphasised that this is a continuously moving policy position.

Committee Conclusion:

The Chair acknowledged that the roll out of Universal Credit will have implications for all schools and asked the Chief Officer to pass on the disquiet of the Select Committee about the use of the PLASC data which despite best intentions has resulted in disadvantaging some schools.

The report was noted.

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8. Actions arising from previous meeting.

The Action List from the last meeting was noted by the Select Committee.

- It was confirmed that the response to the Draft Autism Bill has been sent out to the Members who attended the meeting. The Cabinet Member then took it forward with Shelley Welton.
- The update on the transfer of Free School Meals was given today.
- The 30 hour free childcare offer– confirmation is awaited from Welsh Government and an update will be provided when there is more information available.

9. Children and Young People Work Programme

The forward work programme was omitted from the agenda in error.

In the programme for the next meeting of 28th June 2018 is:

- EAS Performance Report
- Draft NEET (Not in Education Employment or Training) reduction strategy
- Update on the review of inclusion
- Budget monitoring report

The following items are relevant to both Adults and Children and Young People Select Committees and consequently a Special Joint Select Committee will be held on Monday 18th June 2018 at 2.00pm (pre-meeting at 1.30pm) and Members were asked to diarise accordingly. The items are to scrutinise:

- Chief Officer's annual report
- Safeguarding report
- Disabled facilities grant report

10. Cabinet and Council Forward Planner

The Cabinet and Council Forward Planner was noted.

11. Next meeting

The dates of the next meetings were confirmed as:

- Monday 18th June 2018 at 2.00pm (pre-meeting at 1.30pm) – Special Joint Adults and Children and Young People's Select Committee
- Thursday 28th June 2018 at 10.00am (pre-meeting at 9.30pm)

The meeting ended at 11.40 am