

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Children and Young People Select Committee held at Remote Meeting on Tuesday, 13th October, 2020 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor T.Thomas (Chairman)
County Councillor L.Brown, (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: L.Brown, M.Groucutt,
M.Lane, M. Powell and J.Watkins

Officers in Attendance

Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Will McLean, Chief Officer for Children and Young People
Matthew Gatehouse, Head of Policy and Governance
Sharon Randall-Smith, Head of Achievement and Attainment
Jane Rodgers, Head of Children's Services
Lucie Doyle, Educational Psychologist
Rebecca Stanton, Family Support Services Manager
Morwenna Wagstaff, Area Educational Psychologist

APOLOGIES: County Councillor L.Jones and D. Jones and Hazel Ilett.

1. To note the appointment of County Councillor T. Thomas as Chair

Councillor Tudor Thomas was confirmed as chair of the committee.

2. Appointment of Vice Chair

Councillor Jo Watkins proposed Councillor Louise Brown. Seconded by Councillor Maureen Powell and accepted by Councillor Brown.

3. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

4. Public Open Forum

No members of the public were present.

5. Social Services Support for Vulnerable Children

Officers Jane Rodgers and Rebecca Stanton delivered the presentation and answered the members' questions, with additional responses from Will Mclean.

Challenge:

During lockdown, one would have expected an impact from schools not making referrals to your team? Where did the referrals come from at this time?

The referral rate did not drop significantly during lockdown. Many referrals were from the Police, usually concerning domestic abuse. There were also self-referrals from parents struggling with the issues that were affecting their family during this period. Early help provision didn't stop, nor did school-based counselling; so, although we weren't getting referrals directly into Children's Services, we had that open communication with all the early help and support services. Therefore, when problems did emerge, we were able to have the referrals. Issues within families come to light even though the schools might be closed – school is a big referrer, but so are Health and Police. When schools did come back we saw a steady increase, but Police remained the largest referrer.

Is there evidence of an increase in domestic violence during lockdown?

Unfortunately, we don't get to all domestic abuse. The more we can create conditions whereby children and young people can share what's happening at home through services provided by the family support team, the more we can try to tackle those issues early. As mentioned already, the level of police referrals has gone up – the majority of these concern domestic abuse.

Regarding supervised parental meetings, if two families meet will there be a risk of virus transmission? But if we return to virtual meetings, will that affect the children's resilience?

We have been clear about not switching digital off completely – we have continued to offer both approaches. Part of the rationale for that was that if we go back into a full lockdown, children won't be wrong-footed; we will simply increase the digital element. Doubtless, however, it will have an impact on children who want to see their parents that they don't live with. Our contact centres and family time centres have been risk-assessed in detail, and the management that goes on with how families play with toys, the cleaning regime, etc., is all in place. Therefore, where we can still have face-to-face contact, the necessary steps have been put in correctly.

How many of your staff were vulnerable and needed to isolate, and what was the pressure of absence rates? As an authority, can we support that?

The social and emotional pressures on staff have been considerable. We continue to do whatever we can to support their resilience. Going into this phase is very daunting. Our absence rates over this period have not been to the extent where there is a real impact on the service; in fact, they have been remarkably good. Some individuals needed to shield, or were in households with someone shielding – we have worked carefully with them, and risk-assessed them to see what they can do. Many of those people were able to continue to work from home. We monitored the data in this area very closely in case we reached critical levels of staff shortages.

What are your overall reflections on the implications of a potential second national lockdown?

It is very difficult to say. We are more prepared for lockdown now than the first time. We have done a lot of work to make ourselves operational, and understand some of the challenges

better, and the ways in which we can alleviate them. We would certainly be worried about the impact on families, and are especially so about the long-term emotional welfare of the children and young people.

Do you hope to keep the partnership with food banks working?

Yes, this is very high on our agenda. We are speaking with colleagues who were running the food banks and doing that community work about how we can continue that work. We are also looking at how to bring in third sector, to make more of a wider community approach. We are also doing a survey through our early help panel, to ensure our intentions were received in the same way by the families, and to iron out any kinks. We had to be careful in this work with consent, and being transparent to families about sharing information between the teams.

Do we have an idea of the causes for the referral rates having gone up? Particular pressures?

There has been an escalation of existing problems and family dynamics due to the pressures of Covid. Finance has been one of the issues. Another big feature for children and young people has been anxiety around the pandemic, and the lack of an ending to it, which has brought up feelings of grief and loss: children have lost their year in school, activities with friends and, of course, there have been deaths in the family. We've worked hard on how to accept and manage grief and loss in a family setting. We aim to do the annual Remembering event on grief and loss virtually this year. We are also monitoring closely online exploitation, both criminal and sexual, substance and alcohol misuse, and parental mental health.

What support are children with Additional Learning Needs receiving, now that there is no specialist school for them (with Mounton House having closed)?

Yes, these were some of our more vulnerable children during this period. Not all of them could attend their schools, certainly during lockdown. Our role is to provide respite and support to children with disabilities, which we did through our Action For Children disability support service: we spent a number of hours each day with some of our most vulnerable children during this period, to provide respite for the family, and try to keep them in some sort of routine. We had our day respite service, where a child could go during the day, and parents continued to utilise direct payments during the period. So, although we can't ever replace what a child would get from a school, we can provide additional support where it is needed.

There were huge amounts of positive work between CYP and Social Services colleagues throughout lockdown, to ensure we were aware of all of the children who might need support, and ensure that vulnerable children could access support and learning. It is important to remember that Mounton House was open throughout that period, so it was providing support and education to the children during lockdown. There are a number of children whom we support, often in conjunction with Social Services, who have to go to schools out of county: in some cases, they were able to continue attending school, but if not, we worked closely with the schools to ensure they continued their engagement with the children. Our expectation of out of county schools is no different from our expectations of those in county.

Chair's Summary:

The members expressed their gratitude for the work performed by the officers and their colleagues. We have been reassured that Child Services responded quickly, in a very difficult situation. The schools responded very well too. We have had a comprehensive report as to how Child Services has operated during this time, both virtually and – increasingly – in person. We are grateful for the questions that have been answered about violence in the home, which is a major concern of this committee. It is very good to hear that the service has continued to pick up children and families that are at risk, and put in the necessary support. We are glad to hear of the strategies for supporting staff, too. We were reassured about referrals continuing, and staff absences being small. We also heard about the continuing work with external organisations

6. School-based Support for emotional Well-being

Educational Psychologists Morwenna Wagstaff and Lucie Doyle delivered the presentation and answered the members' questions, with additional responses from Will Mclean and Sharon Randall-Smith.

Challenge:

Is the service Gwent-based or Monmouthshire-based?

We are Monmouthshire Educational Psychology Service, although we work increasingly at a network level with our regional colleagues.

ALN covers different conditions, requiring different approaches. How are teachers trained in these different areas?

Yes, we encompass all of the ALN needs. Alongside the work described in the presentation, there are many other strands to the work that we are involved with, in regards to the ALN strategy. In particular, our focus on children that have ALNs, social communication, autism, challenging behaviour, etc. As an EPS we offer layers of work: if it's a complex pupil, we would engage around that child individually, with other professionals, staff and the parents. We then might work at a school level, identifying what each school needs – if a school would benefit from whole school training in a particular area, for example. We also think on a systemic level about what we can offer in that area across the authority.

As we don't have a designated special needs school in Monmouthshire, some children will go to school outside the county. How do you ensure that the private school children benefit from the same training and support as those in state schools?

We are in the process of exploring how to deliver training. While we no longer have a specialist school, we do have four special needs resource bases. We (Drs. Wagstaff and Doyle) are part of the special needs resource base network across Monmouthshire, which brings together professionals from ALN, our service and each of the bases to develop the training and skills to support our children with the most complex needs. When a child has a statement of special educational needs, we are often involved with those children who attend a school outside the

county, whether it is being part of reviews, updating support. These can be some of our most complex cases. We have a high level of work in supporting those children, with the ALN team and other colleagues such as Social Care, to ensure that placements are appropriate, staff are well trained, and the quality of education is what we would want for them.

The hubs are based in the state schools, but is the same support available to non-state schools?

Our service would get involved at an individual level, i.e. if there were an individual training need around a Monmouthshire child at one of those schools. The process we go through before placing a child in an out-of-county school is extensive. The team will be heavily involved in working with the school, parents and health professionals to arrive at a diagnosis that leads to a statement of ALNs. We then go through an extensive process by which we commission a place in a special school for that child, if we can't meet their needs in one of the special needs resource bases in county. We review their statement annually, in consultation with the schools. Although sometimes specific training might be needed, the whole purpose of the process is to put the child in a school whereby the school provides that support and education – it would be unusual, therefore, for us to provide significant training into independent special schools, as that's the very thing that we commission in the first instance.

Have we been able to target the schools attended by children from the most deprived households?

Resilience is not fixed. While there are many children who experience difficult home lives, and extra risk factors, one of the protective factors is the relationships and support that children get from schools. So while we can't change a lot of those home-based factors, schools can do a lot to develop and build resilience. Two weeks ago, we did training that was available for all staff across the schools, in which the focus was building resilience following the pandemic. There were a lot of resources and materials that schools took away, and they all found the training very helpful. Our schools have an identified link EP who is in communication to discuss particular groups of children who might have particular needs.

There has been a 6-month regression in maths for our Year 7 pupils in King Henry VIII – if we go into a further lockdown, do we risk losing a generation of education?

Children regress during the summer holidays anyway, so it's natural for a long closure to have had an impact. Child Services has done some work with Sharon Randall-Smith relating to the 'Closing the Gap' grant from Welsh Government, and works with schools to develop children holistically, so that they have the confidence and other capacities when it comes to trying to close the gap.

Sharon Randall-Smith: We have been working with EPs to look at how we can use some of our funding for accelerated learning provision, to support learners who have moved from Yr 6 into Yr 7 that we have identified as struggling a little bit. We have looked at how we will assist schools in their accelerated learning plan, where they have additional staff to focus particularly

on literacy and numeracy, to accelerate that progress over the next six months, to close the gap as much as possible.

Parents congregating at school gates are a problem. Is there a way in which we can intervene as an authority?

We agree that parents need to model the behaviours that we expect children to follow. The school sites are very clear about movement flows and social distancing. To try to ease the parents gathering in certain places we are looking at road closures in some schools; if successful, we will roll those out further. Beyond that, the relationship between headteachers and parents is critical, but the message would be stronger coming from Headteachers themselves. We have discussed the matter with Heads in the last few meetings, and we will take this point to the Enterprise and Operations teams to see if there is anything further that we can do.

How are you managing to do your work with the Covid restrictions?

We have been, and are still, going into schools where it is essential, based on Welsh Government's guidance – this is a bit vague, so we always take a person-centred approach, looking at the individual circumstances. In some instances, parents are perfectly capable of participating in a Teams meeting with other professionals; this has been quite positive. But in other instances, we need to have those meetings in schools, in line with risk assessments. We try to do as much of our work as possible online. Our schools, professionals and parents have been fantastic in taking that up.

How are the ELSAs managing to go in without breaking the bubbles?

This depends, again, on individual schools and how they use their ELSAs. There is a strong demand from schools to have more ELSAs trained, and we are looking at the national network as to how that can be done, as it is usually face-to-face. Some schools manage their ELSAs within bubbles – they will remain in these over a period of time. In some schools, this has been an issue, which is why they want more ELSAs, effectively one per bubble. Each school has their own risk assessment, which will affect how they use their ELSAs.

Chair's Summary:

The Committee is very grateful to the officers for their work, especially during this time. We have discussed the importance of the four special needs bases in supporting vulnerable learners, and the service's support to all children with statements. Resilience is a difficult concept and very important at this time for children and staff: if staff are not resilient, they will not be able to pass that resilience on to the children. The links between primary and secondary are important, and there is more of a danger of children regressing now than in normal circumstances. We are glad to hear of all the ongoing support. Parents congregating continues to be a problem, and we hope that the authority implements measures such as road closures. The ongoing ELSA work is very important, and we appreciate how difficult it is to provide in-person support in the schools. We need to always bear in mind the teachers who are on the frontline.

7. Blended Learning in Schools

Sharon Randall-Smith presented the report and answered the Members' questions, with additional responses from Will Mclean.

Challenge:

Recent research from the National Foundation for Education Research shows Wales bottom for the effectiveness of learning at home. What is being done to address this?

Longitudinal studies show that, over time, there is not as great a difference between learning face-to-face and distanced learning as was originally thought. As always, the impact and effectiveness will be from the quality of the teaching. Since lockdown, EAS has supported our schools with a lot of advice and access to research and a range of professional learning, including the general skills that teachers and teaching assistants need to develop and deliver effective blended learning. Also, how to audit their skills, consider what good distanced learning looks like, and maintaining good professional learning to support that. Teaching assistants in one school have been heavily engaged in that, and are now disseminating it across other local clusters. In addition, as a region we are developing a Quality Assurance toolkit that will help schools to identify where their strengths and weaknesses are, but also evaluate what that quality begins to look like. Compared perhaps to other regions, we have made great strides in determining what the quality looks like.

One piece of research by the Education Policy Institute last week picked up the number of contacted hours during lockdown in Wales, recognising that the steps Wales had taken in providing IT kit was the best of the four nations. There was a range of different measures in the report that were differential, depending on which one was being considered. Hopefully, we can take both pieces of research together and learn from them.

Has there been an assessment of how well FSM children are doing compared to non-FSM children? And how much homework is being completed compared with the norm pre-Covid?

During the summer term, schools were very keen to track the engagement of all learners, with a particular focus on vulnerable and FSM pupils. Schools maintained regular contact to ensure that they had the necessary equipment, information and support. For vulnerable learners not engaging quite so well, we looked at engaging through attendance at hubs, or different kinds of support that we could give them. Certainly, we are tracking FSM pupils and engagement closely. We have meetings soon with schools to go through their development plans, and to look at their Accelerated Learning plans, as to how those will support the FSM pupils. Much of the best learning is the feedback given to pupils – that is still very possible with a distanced or blended learning model. Some schools have been using a technique called Blip learning: where a lot of learning happens independently or in small groups, and then brought to a general classroom for the teacher to give feedback. The feedback is therefore more positive and immediate for the learners. Very early on, teachers were trying to give formal feedback the way they always had, which became overwhelming for students and teachers. Over time, they have

made things more manageable and effective. There will be some online assessments but they won't be the best and most effective way of learning.

Given everything that is happening, is there an argument to be made for delaying implementation of the new curriculum?

Blended learning is the best way forward for us to deliver the curriculum so that children have the opportunity to develop those skills through a range of contexts, to make learning realistic for themselves and benefit from it. The process has been accelerated a little earlier than we thought; we understand the curriculum seems to be coming towards schools very quickly. But, whether schools are expected to be up and running perfectly at that point, given the current circumstances, is quite unlikely. That point was stressed in a recent survey. A lot of work has already been done by schools in moving forward with delivery of the new curriculum, but we accept that it isn't going to be perfect; in fact, it likely wouldn't have been even if we hadn't had the pandemic. This period has given our schools, and particularly clusters, the opportunity to share resources; for example, one cluster has a shared database, to which examples of practice and resources are uploaded for everyone. This makes the process more manageable.

The fifty five 'mandatory' references in the bill are seemingly opposed to the general approach of local curricula; by contrast, the Education Act of 1996 had no references to 'mandatory'.

This is an understandable point. When we, as a region, reviewed our view on the curriculum and whether it should continue as it is, we also looked at responses from headteachers, trade unions, secondary head groups, etc. to understand how it felt being in school delivering it. Most felt that the flexibility with which schools work now was supportive, and the flexibility in the new curriculum enables them to make learning experiences valuable and worthwhile.

Chair's Summary:

We have had reassurance about blended learning. It is set to continue, so the better schools become at delivering it, and the more support that the authority can give, the better. Interesting points were raised about NFER, which we might consider in the future, and the issue of FSM pupils' performance – about which this committee is always concerned. Perhaps pupils from a more supportive background find blended learning a bit easier. We are keen to track the engagement of learners. Issues were raised about distanced learning; this committee will come back to that. We heard concerns about the new curriculum, but we have been reassured about the flexibility of schools' approaches.

8. Children and Young People Select Committee Forward Work Programme

An extra meeting is proposed for November, in which to cover an update on the former pupils of Mounton House, and ALN provision in the authority. The meeting in December will cover a paper on homelessness and a review of Play Provision. We also need to cover Welsh provision in Monmouth: it is proposed that this is also covered in the December meeting.

Officer Will Mclean questioned the validity of covering the former pupils of Mounton House, as it has been addressed previously, and the matter concluded. Councillor Brown suggested that an update would be beneficial to the committee, fitting in with scrutinising ALN provision, and they would be interested to hear about the different approaches e.g. alternative living in Newport. Officer Mclean welcomed detailed scrutiny of ALN but expressed concern that following up on the progress of former Mounton House pupils would potentially violate their anonymity. Councillor Groucott asked for regular updates regarding Welsh provision in Abergavenny. Officer Mclean agreed and noted that the item in December would cover broader aspects of Welsh provision, not strictly limited to Monmouth.

9. Council and Cabinet Work Plan

10. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting held on 8th September 2020

The minutes were confirmed and signed as an accurate record.

11. To confirm the date and time of the next meeting

8th December 2020 was confirmed as the date of the next meeting, pending confirmation of a meeting in November.

The meeting ended at **1.46 pm**