

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Children and Young People Select Committee held at County Hall, Usk with Remote Attendance on Monday, 26th July, 2021 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

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

County Councillors: C.Edwards, M.Groucutt,
D. Jones, M.Lane and M. Powell

Also in attendance: Mrs M. Harris,
Monmouthshire Association of School Governors

Officers in Attendance

Will McLean, Chief Officer for Children and Young People

Nikki Wellington, Finance Manager

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager

Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer

Tyrone Stokes, Accountant

Emma Davies, Performance Officer

APOLOGIES: County Councillor J.Watkins and Mr. P. Strong

1. Declarations of Interest

The committee agreed to record any declarations of interest as and when appropriate in discussing the reports.

2. Budget Monitoring

The Finance Manager for Social Care and Health introduced the report, drawing member's attention to relevant sections within the report relating to Children's Services. The officer advised that the situation in respect of reserves had improved significantly, given the receipt of a Welsh Government grant for covid costs and also due to savings arising from staff working from home and several staff vacancies. He also advised that budgeted savings have been achieved, whilst pressures in Children's Services relating to Looked After Children remain. The increased pay award had also had an impact on the budgetary situation. He explained the multi-agency placement team in Children's Services (MIST) and advised that this service had achieved the savings anticipated. There is still an overspend primarily due to the Looked After Children associated costs.

The Finance manager for Children and Young People introduced her part of the report, taking members through relevant sections, explaining the elements relating to central budgets. Overspends are relating largely to children needing specialist provision. She highlighted the position relating to school balances and gave explanation for deficits.

The chair thanked officers for their comprehensive presentation of the report and invited questions from the committee, as follows:

Member Challenge:

Councillor Martyn Groucutt declared a personal but non-prejudicial interest as a Governor of King Henry Comprehensive and advised that he was a Governor at Llantilio Pertholey Primary.

- I'm pleased to see the assistance that has been given by Welsh Government to assist the Council during the pandemic. I would like to see a longer term funding stream, because I recognise the impacts on schools in terms of budgeting. I'm relieved to see that we are not trying to find things to spend grant monies on but I do think it could be better planned.

I understand your concerns and whilst the money is welcome, it can be used to better effect if its use can be planned.

- My question is in relation to page 32 of the report and the table which demonstrates an improvement in some schools in comparison with others. Are schools in surplus as a result of receiving grants? Please could you offer an explanation.

I think it's helpful to recognise that there are schools with structural deficits at the start of the year, Chepstow being an example. Chepstow had a recovery plan in place and was making progress, however a restructure was delayed for a year due to covid, and that means that even with grant monies, it's position is not where it would have wanted to be, were it able to continue its journey on its recovery plan. This is the same for other schools, who may or not have been able to have continued with their recovery plans. The grants were prescribed by Welsh Governments primarily considering the size of the school and this is something we were not able to affect.

Councillor Maureen Powell declared a personal but non-prejudicial interest as a Governor of King Henry Comprehensive before asking;

- I have concern that children who were digitally excluded at the start of the pandemic and may not have had support at home to continue learning from home may have fallen behind. Can any of this money be used to support them?

Yes, the grants can be used to support these children and schools are considering now how best to support these children to ensure nobody falls behind.

- I noted your comment about the pay award exceeding the planned 1%. Is the 1% still factored for future pay awards, as this will have an impact on budgetary planning?

This is still under negotiation, but I recognise your concern.

Chair's Conclusion:

I'd like to thank the officers for a detailed report on the revenue and capital outturn position and for answering our questions. The committee is grateful for the concise explanation of the key budgetary issues in the service areas that fall within our remit. To summarise, we are pleased that grant money is being put to good use and we recognise some children have suffered greatly during the pandemic. We recognise it is for schools to decide, but we would hope that the money is used to support those most in need. These figures could be seen to be masking a challenging situation, but we are relieved that the monies were given to us to assist with costs relating to covid.

3. Performance Monitoring

Members were advised that this report had been brought to the select committee to enable members to consider the Council's progress in meeting its five priority goals as set out in the five-year Corporate Plan. The officer explained the structure of the report and explained how the

actions relate to the goals and specifically the focus would be on the areas that fall within the committee's remit, Appendix 2 providing a progress update.

The officer explained that the pandemic had led to some delays on projects and some work having been paused temporarily, as the Council focussed its attention on delivering key services in challenging times. The council has a Coronavirus Strategy which was adopted by the cabinet and has ensured that activities have been focussed and coordinated. The council has needed to respond to the pandemic and put in place initiatives to support people and some of these significant activities are:

- The advancement in digital and blended learning to ensure children could access learning during schools closures
- Family Support meetings in outdoor settings
- Remote Friday Friendlies ~ a Monmouthshire Youth Council Engage 2 Change Initiative to enable young people to meet and talk
- The shift project ~ supported 100 young people face to face and digitally who had poor mental health and well-being
- Outdoor open access play sessions during Easter holidays for 1100 children and young people
- Mon life activity hubs at the 4 leisure centres which accommodated 4200 young people
- Summer play scheme held at 3 sites across the county to provide additional support for children with disabilities

Ordinarily the report would include national performance indicators which would enable us to draw comparisons with other councils, however, the pandemic has led to insufficient information being collected to be able to benchmark to analyse performance, although we have gathered what data is available and provided an explanation. The report on progress against the five goals will be presented to Council in October.

The chair thanked the Performance and Improvement Officer for the presentation and invited questions from members.

Member Challenge:

- My comment is in relation to action points in the report, particularly the Home to School Transport and Safe Routes to School ~ I believe these are the same and should be amalgamated.

I agree and this is something that we can take forward, given that we are in the final year of this Corporate Plan.

- The report refers to reviewing and developing leadership structures across schools such as Kymin and Llandogo and as I believe that as we move forward, we need to look at amalgamation of leadership structures in terms of management, but also in terms of governing bodies, the example being Abergavenny and the proposals for the new "through school", to ensure the transition is as smooth as possible.

Thanks for the question and your comment which is a fair one. There are several schools where we have partnership leadership arrangements and I think this is a very fair comment and is something we do need to do in the future.

- The report refers to money being spent to improve travel routes to schools in towns. I'm not sure how these are being improved and if this is a question for MonLife.

Money had been received from Welsh Government for Active Travel and also Safer Routes and climate change considerations but due to the rurality of the county, some children will need to access school by bus, so this is something that MonLife are working on at the moment.

- I recall an initiative in another area named 'Walking Buses' where children are accompanied by each other and older children to access school. I'm not sure if this would be feasible in our county.

The 'Walking Bus' schemes are very interesting and we will consider them but we need to find approaches that suit each school individually.

Chairs Conclusion:

I'd like to offer thanks to you for preparing this report and for the input of the Chief Officer. There were two points raised by members today in terms of amalgamating the actions relating to Home to School Transport and Safe Routes to Schools and also the comments about developing the management arrangements and governance around schools with shared leadership. There are no other specific recommendations members wish to make, so I'm content that the committee is satisfied with the performance of the areas that fall within this committee's remit.

4. To confirm the date and time of the next meeting as 9th September 2021

The meeting ended at **10.50 am**