

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Children and Young People Select Committee held at The Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr, Usk, NP15 1GA on Tuesday, 28th January, 2020 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor T.Thomas (Chairman)
County Councillors: L.Brown, M.Groucutt, L.Jones, M.Lane, M. Powell, J.Watkins
P. Strong NEU
Also in attendance County Councillors: R.John and P. Murphy.

Officers in Attendance

Will McLean, Chief Officer for Children and Young People
Julie Boothroyd, Chief Officer Social Care, Safeguarding and Health
Jane Rodgers, Head of Children's Services
Nikki Wellington, Finance Manager
Tyrone Stokes, Accountant
Richard Jones, Performance Manager
Sian Schofield, Management Information Officer
Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer

APOLOGIES: Councillors D. Jones, F. Middleton and Harris

1. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Maureen Powell declared a personal and non-prejudicial interest, as a member of the Finance Committee on the board of Governors for King Henry VIII Comprehensive.

2. Public Open Forum

3. Children's social services performance reporting

Officers presented a performance report for quarter 2, which was based upon the statutory performance framework and outlined the performance of Welsh Government indicators, providing local context where relevant. Officers highlighted the increasing pressure on service, with a greater number of adults requiring social service interventions.

Members heard that the numbers of Looked After Children (LAC) have increased, which is positive in terms of being able to help more children but it is placing pressure on the service. The committee was advised that there has been a greater focus on the 'early help offer' and 'family support offer' and that these interventions are assisting a lot of families and it is hoped that these types of services will reduce the number of referrals. Members heard that over the next 18 months, the "families together team' has been helping children to leave care and re-join their families.

Officers explained that there is a need to increase in-house foster care provision, as it's not yet meeting our demand and that there is an ongoing strategy to recruit and retain

social work staff, due to difficulties in recruiting to the child protection team given the nature of the role being highly pressurised.

Challenge:

- You have identified that our LAC numbers have increased and that it is contrary to the Welsh trend and your explanation within the report is that numbers are rising as we are becoming more informed and aware of child protection issues. Are our assessment processes the same as other councils? Why are our numbers higher?

There is a rigorous assessment before any child joins the protection register. Your question is difficult to answer as there is no ideal target for what our case numbers should be. I'm confident that our processes are as they should be. Our practice can always change and improve, but whether that would lower the numbers is difficult to say. Numbers rising or falling is not a positive or negative issue. What is important is whether our thresholds are right. Our approach is a multiagency one based upon the Gwent footprint.

- You have mentioned recruitment difficulties? Is there any way of making the role more varied??

We frequently revisit how should we structure and manage the workload in Social Services and all qualified staff do elements of it, but some teams do more of it and that's the picture across Wales. We continually review this and we think we have the right structure at present in terms of how we manage the work within the team and develop the right culture.

- You say our LAC numbers have increased against Welsh average. Is there any correlation with the statistics around substance misuse and mental health services? Are we doing supportive work with the families on this?

Yes, we work with families to understand what needs to change and there are 2 strands to the support ~ one is pre-intervention level support and the other follows into education care.

- Are we adequately supporting care leavers?

Yes, we provide support to care leavers. All have individual packages bespoke to them as an individual, because some [people have particular issues which is why they need bespoke packages created.

- Please can you explain the issues related to recruitment in foster carers and how that relates to MIST?
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The issue we have is recruiting foster carers and it is an ongoing issue. There is a pay gap, so it's the really the support offer that we offer that differentiates us from others

and draws people to become foster carers in Monmouthshire. It is our approach to how we look after children which is particularly attractive to foster carers. The MIST project focusses on having the right carers.

Chair's Conclusion and Outcome

We have scrutinised this in detail and the committee understands the nature of the problems officers are facing. We agree as a committee that the service is coping as well as it can with the demands placed upon it. We also agree that we would like to scrutinise the issue of support for care leavers to better understand the support given to them, so we will table a future report on the care leaver package and MIST.

4. Budget Monitoring report - Month 7

Officers suggested that it would be advisable to discuss the Month 7 Budget Monitoring report in conjunction with the draft Capital and Revenue proposals for 2020-21 as the budget monitoring report provided the wider context for the challenges being faced in the current year and moving forward.

Members heard that at month 7, the council is facing significant challenges, with the level of service overspends being very significant compared to recent years. Officers explained that in previous years, we have managed overspends so that at the point of budget outturn, we are usually breaking even or returning a small surplus and that continues to be the attempt.

Paragraph 3.2 provides a table which shows a net council surplus of £4 million. In terms of context, these are driven from 3 areas:

- Children's services and looked after children pressures
- Pressures in adult social care
- Support for children with additional learning needs

Officers explained that as we don't carry significant levels of reserves, we have had to put recovery plans in place to react to the situation we are in. Recovery plans are to curb all non-essential expenditure and where possible, to look to generate further savings whilst arresting the current position.

The committee was referred to paragraph 3.10 of report, which showed the position we are currently in and detailed our plan of action. Officers advised we are forecasting a deficit of £3.987m and were fortunate to be able to make the teachers' pay awards in the current year, £310k being provided by Welsh Government WG. The £1.9m VAT recovery due to the Ealing ruling around leisure services income also will assist the position. Members heard that consultants had been appointed to work with us on securing this recovery and that we have a strong case pending. The committee heard that we now have the flexibility to use capital receipts to funds costs associated with service reform. Previously, permission was needed but now in line with Welsh Government guidance, the council is able to make that decision. Furthermore, we have been interrogating our spend to identify costs associated with service reform and over £2m reform costs could actually be addressed through the use of capital receipts.

Winter pressures could still be risk areas in terms of the budget and also the volatile service areas that are pressure points, notably children's services, however, we are looking at where we stand with that long before the outturn budgetary position.

In terms of the capital position, there is a small level of underspend in relation to 21st Century Schools. Capital receipts are shown in the report and these have been impacted by the decision to make flexible use of capital receipts. That will have an impact for this year and next year, but we have to balance the revenue account pressures with the capital. In terms of month 7, the report provides the detail on overspends and underspends specific to the committees remit together with directors' commentary.

We've mentioned the capitalisation directive already and we have transferred £500k expenditure across to the capital budget. In terms of savings, if you refer to paragraph 3.11, you will see that of the £6.446 million built into this year's budget, we've found 86%. The rest of those savings are either delayed or unachievable and greater detail is provided in the report, with the detail for this committee's portfolio provided in the appendix.

The Finance Manager for Social Care and Health added that paragraph 3.60 details the mitigating action to address the overspend in Children's Services and the proposed use of capital receipts to offset the overspend. Similarly, paragraph 3.9 details how much capital will be used to bolster the revenue budget, adding that there is no capital in the social services directorate. He explained that as part of budget setting process, there are various budget setting targets to make savings and that it is not felt to be achievable.

The Finance Manager for Education highlighted that paragraph 3.2 details that the children and young people's directorate are overspent in respect of additional learning needs support. She highlighted the position in terms of school based redundancies, Teacher's pay awards and Individual Schools Budgets, previously alluded to.

Challenge:

- The schools in deficit are a real concern. It appears that King Henry has a plan in place, but the deficits for Caldicot and Monmouth are increasing despite having plans in place, so my question is what mitigations are taking place?

King Henry has a plan in place but they aren't hitting it at the moment. Caldicot is showing some small improvement. These reports only show a year of the recovery plan whereas it's more helpful to see progress over a 3-year period. We are monitoring the schools monthly to make sure they are making improvements. We are working with Caldicot on some 'invest to save initiatives', so you may see a rise initially, but they are on target to come back.

- We know LAC has increased, so we don't see how you can make any savings given that you cannot use capital. So what are your long term plans to address this?

You are right, there are limited actions we can take and we will discuss this as part of the budget proposals. We are trying to drive down costs in commissioning, but it is against very significant pressures.

Chair's Conclusion:

I think we all share the same concern that all of our comprehensives are in significant deficit and many of our primaries too. We must recognise the difference in schools and we accept that this a national picture, but it's cold comfort for head teachers trying to manage the position. We will continue to carefully monitor this and we hope for some improvements.

5. Scrutiny of the 2020/21 draft budget proposals

Given that the context for the budget proposals had been set in the Month 7 Budget Monitoring Report, the chair advised that it would be useful for officers to present the headlines prior to moving into questions.

The Finance Manager explained that the budget setting process for each year begins with an assessment of the baseline budget, the known pressures, the Welsh Government settlement and the Council Tax input and then try to bridge the gap between this with saving proposals. Officers highlighted that we've had to reduce the budget over several years, so with £9.7 million pressures and then payroll pressures, the position has amounted to £11.25 million pressures. They advised that whilst we have had the teachers' pay awards funded by Welsh Government, this has not gone far against the £11.2 million. The Cabinet Member explained that we have more costs to bear and are having to propose savings that are unpopular as a last resort and that this results in the need to increase council tax.

The key areas of pressure within the committee's remit were discussed, in particular the £3 million pressure for LAC, the £5 million pressure for children with additional learning needs, which are the same pressures carried through each time.

Challenge:

- Are there hidden costs in these figures that would justify the need for a special school?

You rightly identify there is a pressure for a rural county 'home to school transport', but the argument for a special school is well rehearsed and whether you could one that had efficiency of scope and scale for Monmouthshire is questionable. Even transporting from north to south is costly and we have agreed to bring forward proposals to support children with additional learning needs.

- The Cabinet Member has mentioned holding discussions with Welsh Government on the funding formula and our request for a funding floor'. Can you update on progress please? And can you give us an assurance if additional funds were to be received, that you would consider withdrawing the 2% cut to individual school's budgets (ISB's)?

The amount of additional funding if a funding floor were to be agreed would amount to £833k and if we were able to secure these monies, we would revisit the 2% cut to ISB's. I cannot give a concrete answer, as it depends upon whether we receive any additional funding, but in terms of the progress, we are aware that the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) is putting the pressure on Welsh Government.

- So if we don't receive any additional funding, how are schools supposed to take a 2% cut to funding, as surely we are now talking about staffing costs?

This is a difficult question to answer because staffing decisions are made by the governing body. In many of our schools, the staffing is very expensive as experienced staff are on top of their paygrades, but the core message from head teachers is that it will result in staffing reductions. We will continue to support schools to find alternatives.

Cabinet Member ~ We have made all the major savings we can. We are as lean as we can be, so if we don't spread the burden across the whole authority, it will be disproportionate to the rest of the authority. What isn't fair is the low level of funding we receive. If we receive additional funding, we can make different decisions.

- Please can you explain how the loan system operates?

We recognise that under current fair funding arrangements, schools only have 3 years to repay deficits, which is very challenging. This system allows for the deficit to be paid back over a longer term to minimise the impact.

- The loans are interest free at the moment, but that is on the basis of interest rates being low. If they were to rise, this will surely have an impact. My preference would be that the loan never becomes interest bearing.

Unfortunately, we don't have this money to lend, we have to borrow it, so we are paying the interest on it. The proposal at the moment is that we absorb it and keep it off schools and that schools still try to clear these deficits early.

- Does this mean that a school could take out a loan now for a period of 10 years and pay back more than they are borrowing?

This situation would be unlikely as the loan is at a fixed rate.

- Please can you explain any mitigations to the children's services overspend, accepting that it is a very difficult position?

The expansion of the MIST team structure will initially require an investment, but it should save money over the longer term by reducing the work that needs to be provided to external solicitors. Just for the committee's information, the average cost of responsibility for a looked after child is £40k, so 10 children each year would amount to £400k, which we cannot hide from.

Chairs conclusion:

We've discussed the headline pressures, the mitigations put in place by officers and the possibility of the funding floor, which would benefit the council significantly and particularly our children's services. We support the cabinet member on this and request to be kept updated on progress. We have concerns in respect of the 2% cuts to schools and we recognise the schools' concerns. We also have some concerns around the loan system structure, in terms of inflation. We acknowledge there are possible savings in legal costs through implementing the MIST project in children's services.

6. Progress Update on Key Stage 4 Outcomes

The chief officer for education provided a short introduction to the report, advising that there is a significant amount of data analysis that takes place before presenting such a report to the committee. Progress at key stage 4 has been an area of particular focus for a number of years. The committee heard that the reporting framework has changed and that an explanation of the new reporting framework had been discussed at the previous committee meeting.

The EAS explained that this report was timely in view of the new curriculum. The EAS presented their report, taking members through a detailed explanation of the data and the findings. Members heard that data can only tell part of the story and that the quality of teaching is critical. The chief officer for education explained that data training for governors has been revised and there is now an opportunity to think about our expectations, which are for the secondaries to do better than they are currently and to not to see the tailing off after primary school. He presented the challenge as how schools compare against their family of schools, in order to gauge a meaningful comparison and advised that it's an ongoing dialogue with secondary schools to understand the progress they are making and the changes they will make to secure those outcomes.

Challenge:

- I have concerns about the Free School Meal (FSM) cohort and the range of difficulties that these children face and my concern is how the council addresses poverty. We have pockets of severe poverty in this county, so it's not just about narrowing the gap in educational attainment, it's about how we address the much wider picture and the impact of poverty. I would welcome hearing from King Henry School how they address this. The school should be looking at the small number of very vulnerable children and looking at how they can support each one. Recognising that the EAS will be looking at this, I would like to suggest that we invite King Henry and look at the wider reasons why these young people don't fulfil their potential.

I recognise your points on this and in my last two chief officer reports, I attempted to explain to members the level of complexity around this and to explain the consequence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's) and the impact on learners. It's important that we move beyond knowing who these children are and actually put in interventions to

help them. We need to take account of our full vulnerable population and by this I mean those children with additional learning needs as well as those in children in receipt of free school meals.

EAS ~ Every secondary school has a 'vulnerable learner lead' funded by the EAS and they work together to look at best practice and we intend to bring a report to a future meeting of this committee on this. We have looked at individual pupil data, but the question is where we go from here.

Chief Officer ~ This is the first year of this kind of reporting and this does not show aggregated data across other councils. We are towards the top third, but I fully accept that we should be at the top of the table.

Chairs conclusion:

We have fully scrutinised this and we have agreed to invite King Henry VIII Comprehensive to a future meeting and we will await a further report on the plans for children in receipt of Free School Meals.

7. Education Achievement Service Business Plan

The EAS presented their report which consisted of their Business Plan and the local authority annex, which are being consulted on for the forthcoming year. They explained that they present this plan to the scrutiny committees of each council and the executives as they are owned by the 5 councils and are a not-for-profit body. They drew members' attention to paragraph 3.8 to demonstrate the link between Monmouthshire's priorities and their overall priorities, suggesting areas we still need to work on collaboratively. They also highlighted in paragraph 3.24 the risks, prior to asking for questions.

Challenge:

- You refer to Monmouthshire risks in paragraph 3.24 and you have also mentioned school exclusions, so a question for the chief officer for education is whether the rise in school exclusions is due to the cutting of support staff, such as teaching assistants?

Surely an effective way of reducing exclusions would be to increase funding?

And a question for the EAS is this – if you are embarking on a new curriculum and you are needing to raise standards on the current curriculum whilst also preparing for new curriculum, do you have enough funding to do the both?

Chief officer ~ we recognise this as growing concern and I acknowledged it in last year's plan. We've put Pupil Referral Support into the schools as a pilot to see if this works, but in terms of teaching assistant and support staff, when we look at numbers, it's not as stark as we might perceive. Last year we were focussing on reducing exclusions whereas this year, we are looking at the reasons and are working in partnership to support them.

EAS ~ We are confident that within the current funding model, we can achieve this. We have already developed a common set of expectations across Wales.

Conclusion:

The committee has held the EAS to account today, given that we fund them, this is a very important role for us. We have considered their priorities and how they align with ours and we are satisfied with the alignment. In addition, we have been reassured by the EAS that they have the funding to deliver this, so are we happy to support this Business Plan.

8. Attainment Strategies

The committee welcomed the opportunity to meet directly with the head teacher and deputy head teacher of Chepstow Comprehensive School in order to better understand their success factors in improving the attainment of pupils in receipt of free school meals and to also discuss with them the challenges they face as a school operating on the border of Wales and England. The head teacher introduced the deputy head Kelly Bowden who is the Free School Meal (FSM) Champion at Chepstow Comprehensive School. Members were advised that FSM is complex issue and that the school had worked on many strategies, some of which they abandoned. The school admitted that the outcomes for FSM children in Chepstow were not where they should be and that this is a picture replicated across Wales.

The school explained that they are looking at a wider measure than the usual outcomes of 5 GCSE's and they presented information (appendix 1) to demonstrate some of the wider measures. They explained that they have decided to assess the whole school's FSM eligible children, not simply those at key stage 4. They advised that some of the measures that have proven particularly effective are undertaking home visits to talk to families to understand how best to support the child needs.

Other factors that are key, are high quality teaching learning and a curriculum to suit the needs of learners. They confirmed that the surveys they have undertaken have shown that children feel safe in their school and that this is something they are proud of. When children were asked what values were important to them, equity was the top value, regardless of the child's background and that the 5 top values will form part of the school's mission statement, the children having played a key role in setting the direction and ethos of the school.

Challenge:

- I can imagine that the interchange to secondary from primary must be a huge step for all children, but particularly for vulnerable youngsters and it's very easy to fall back, so what are you doing with the primaries to support them so they can hit the ground running?

We are building a new curriculum and we are working with the primaries in the locality so that we know who we need to support, as some of the children will be going to

Wyedean not Chepstow. We feel confident that we have a handle on this. We believe in family engagement officers so much that we have engaged a second one.

- Have you evaluated the taking of GCSE's over 3 years as opposed to 2?

We feel that taking GCSE's back to 2 years is right for our learners. We are looking to build the curriculum and we will monitor the impact, because we don't know what qualifications will look like in the future.

- Can you highlight some of the challenges of being a border school?

We have experienced a fall in our numbers, transport is also a key issue for us, also some recruitment issues. We strongly believe in celebrating the Welsh language but we have to be mindful of the Welsh Baccalaureate, because some parents don't want their children to be taught this qualification.

Chairs conclusion:

On behalf of the committee, I would like to congratulate your school on the amazing work that you have undertaken to build unity and to try to support your most vulnerable pupils. I wish we had more time to talk to you today, but we really appreciate your time and the opportunity to hear from you directly. The committee has agreed that it would like to invite King Henry VIII Comprehensive to talk to us about their strategies and we have agreed that this will be tabled for a future meeting.

9. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting:

Joint Adults and Children and Young People Select Committees - 5th September 2019

10. Children and Young People Select Committee Forward Work Plan

Noted, with the additions from today's meeting:

- Invite King Henry VIII Comprehensive to talk to us about their strategies for supporting vulnerable pupils.
- Additional Learning Needs ~ Outcomes for pupils in categories A and B pupils in respect of Mounton House.

11. Council and Cabinet Work Plan

Noted.

12. Next Meeting

Tuesday 17th March 2020 at 10.00am.