

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Children and Young People Select Committee held at Remote Meeting on Thursday, 11th February, 2021 at 2.00 pm

Councillors Present

County Councillor T Thomas (Chairman)
County Councillors: L.Brown, L.Dymock,
M.Groucutt and M. Powell
M. Harris, Monmouthshire Association of School
Governors
P. Strong, NEU

Officers in Attendance

Sharon Randall-Smith, Head of Achievement and
Attainment
Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Ed Pryce , EAS
Darren Jones, EAS

APOLOGIES: County Councillors M.Lane and J.Watkins

1. Declarations of Interest.

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

2. To consult on the EAS Business Plan for 2021/2022 prior to Cabinet agreement in April 2021 (report to follow).

Ed Pryce and Darren Jones from the EAS introduced the item by explaining that the EAS delivers a wide range of school improvement services to all schools in the local authorities who form part of the consortia. Ed explained he would focus on key elements of the report before Darren would take specific questions relating to Monmouthshire schools. The report was being brought to the committee to provide members an opportunity to comment on the contents of the annual business plan and in doing so, to consider the strengths and areas for improvement in Monmouthshire's schools.

Ed advised that the business plan had been written in the context of the changing situation with the covid 19 pandemic and the extent to which we can predict the future for the next 12 months. The EAS had discussed the main priorities for the region with senior leadership in schools and the focus for the next 12 months was on hope and optimism and evolving and adapting learning during the covid 19 recovery phase. Ed reiterated that the EAS would be sensitive to the needs of the school workforce and be supportive and responsive as an organisation. Whilst support would align to the expectations of local authorities and Welsh Government, the EAS is considering emerging research on blended learning. The EAS would also seek to avoid unnecessary bureaucracy for schools. Ed confirmed that mid-year evaluations that are reported to EAS governance groups are available to view. Members heard that a 'Professional Learning Offer' would be available to all schools to meet developmental needs as the pandemic draws to a close and that grant

permitting, all schools would be funded to deliver a large proportion of the professional learning activity. Schools would also benefit from bespoke support packages that meet the priorities identified in their School Development Plans and that there would be flexibility to allow for changes in circumstance in light of the pandemic. Ed confirmed that the EAS's centralised model has enabled it to realise efficiencies and secure economies of scale and has enabled a high level expertise to be developed across the region.

The EAS would continue to work in partnership with councils to address their recommendations from Estyn and their strategic priorities. Monmouthshire's strategic priorities are to improve outcomes for some of our most vulnerable learners, to increase the number of pupils achieving excellent standards, to articulate clear strategy for special educational needs and to strengthen the use of self-evaluation evidence to inform improvement planning. Some of the key priorities for the EAS would be to provide well-being support for practitioners and learners, to provide bespoke support to schools, to improve the quality of learning and teaching (including blended learning) and to support specific groups of disadvantaged and vulnerable learners, including those disproportionately affected by school closures. Other priorities would be to help schools to realise the Curriculum for Wales, to ensure access to a range of regional and national professional learning, to include access to mentoring and coaching and to promote regional practitioner networks. The EAS would continue to support the development of leaders in schools, build capacity of governing bodies through professional learning and develop a culture of accountability that values the characteristics of effective schools. They would also embed their internal evaluation model to ensure effective and efficient support is provided to all schools and settings. Ed drew members' attention to the ambitions and risks sections of the report and explained that mitigations are in place. The resource implications were referred to in more detail, Ed advising Members of Monmouthshire's financial contribution and the uncertainty at this time in respect of the grant funding situation.

Member Challenge:

The chair thanked Ed for his comprehensive presentation of the report and he offered thanks to the EAS for the services they have been providing during challenging and unprecedented times. He invited questions from the committee, as follows:

- My question is in relation to the local authority funding reduction referenced in paragraph 5.10. Given there is likely to be an increased demand to support vulnerable children as a result of the pandemic, I am wondering whether you were given less money by the Council this year or whether this was a planned reduction in funding?

This was a planned reduction as a result of offering up efficiency savings to all local authority partners.

- There is emerging evidence that learning outcomes for vulnerable learners have been impacted on due to the pandemic. If teachers have had to invest their efforts into developing online learning approaches, has work on progressing the new Curriculum for Wales been deferred and is there an argument to request Welsh Government to delay its introduction?

Recognising this is a decision for Welsh Government, I can appreciate this could be seen as an unnecessary burden at the present time, but as many of your schools are

preparing for it as an ongoing process, as long as there is flexibility and understanding given to schools in its implementation, I see it as an opportunity rather than a threat. During the pandemic, the EAS has supported schools in working towards introducing the new curriculum and we will continue to help support any gaps.

- Can I clarify whether you are saying that because of the challenges of the last 12 months, schools may be less prepared for the new curriculum than they would have been under different circumstances?

I think there have certainly been challenges and schools may not feel as prepared as they would like to be, but this has been ongoing work and has not paused entirely. Professional learning is much more flexible now and in some respects, professional learning in respect of the new curriculum may be more advanced.

- In terms of the strategic priorities for Monmouthshire listed under paragraph 3.21, Monmouthshire's strategic priorities seem to be staying the same, whilst two of the other local authorities' list closing the covid gap as their priority. Should this also be one of ours, considering that children have missed out on full time education and the vulnerable children will have been impacted to a greater degree? Some of the strategic priorities appear to be absent for some of the councils.

Also, with regard to the Curriculum and Assessment Bill, some of the feedback suggested there was concern that there may be an extra burden on teachers in delivering the new curriculum as well as helping learners. You have said that schools were preparing for this on an ongoing basis, however, should more effort be focussed on helping children catch up after missing full time education in a classroom environment?

EAS ~ People will have their own views on the new curriculum but we need to align to the direction of the Welsh Government and feedback from schools suggests some schools feel ready for this, but there is inevitably some variation and we will do our utmost to support those schools. Some of the strategic priorities of the other local authorities were missing at the time of drafting our report, but they will all be included in the final version.

MCC ~ Estyn recommendations have guided our work going forward. We're in a situation now where we have to support schools in different ways and our priorities have had to change. Our strategic aims are overarching and at the outset of the pandemic, the priority was to enable the children of key workers to return to school, which was not an easy task. Then the priority changed to supporting distance learning as discussed in the members' seminar held a few weeks ago. More recently, the priority was for children to return to schools safely and to a degree, we have managed this, accepting that some children are currently still learning at home. Now the priority will be to prepare our children for whatever this year's assessment process will look like and to support our schools. We are continually reviewing our strategic aims in line with the work we are doing with Estyn and when we next review our priorities after children have returned to school, we will talk to schools to see if a further priority will need to be added around closing the gaps in learning as you have referred to, however, it is very difficult to determine the extent to which this is an issue and actions to address it until we have our students back in school settings.

- I don't think we should underestimate the work that needs to be undertaken to prepare for the new curriculum and I am concerned that there will be so many challenges for teachers so I think we need to be very mindful of this.

EAS ~ We need to be alert as to how schools respond to challenges but we will continue to listen and support teachers as best we can.

- I'd like to echo and support the concerns of Councillor Brown in relation to closing the gap for the vulnerable learners.

Chair's Conclusion:

I'd like to offer our thanks to Ed and Darren from the EAS for their attendance and their input in this meeting and for answering our questions. To summarise, the reduced funding issue was explained, however, the committee's key concerns remain whether there needs to be a new strategic priority to close the gap in learning for all children, but particularly vulnerable children who may have suffered disproportionately during the pandemic.

We have concerns about the introduction of new curriculum in 2022, but we recognise this is a political issue that Welsh Government will need to consider and that this cannot be influenced by the select committee. We have concern for the welfare of teachers and trust that the Council and EAS will listen to them and offer them the appropriate support.

3. Presentation on engagement on Free School Meals ahead of drafting strategy.

Members were advised that this topic had been brought to the select committee to engage the members on the Free School Meals strategy in advance of drafting the strategy. The Head of Achievement and Attainment advised members that they had a draft Free Schools Meals (FSM) Strategy ready to bring to the committee last year, however, a visit from Estyn and the Covid 19 pandemic had brought about new considerations. Estyn had suggested the council may want to consider having a targeted resource for FSM and they identified that the absence of performance information to provide indications on progress posed difficulties in measuring improvement. The Head of Achievement and Attainment explained that this period of reflection had led officers to conclude that what they would have presented to members last year would be very different to they would present today and that this would be very different to what they would be likely to present in the future.

The presentation would provide an overview of the various issues that need to feed into the strategy, some issues having been raised earlier in the meeting, such as how best to help children catch up on their learning and achieve their best. The officer explained that they had begun by considering the definition of poverty and had worked with the 'Tackling Poverty and Inequality Group' to reach a consistent

definition, also contributing to the action plan of this group. The definition that has been used is “when a person’s resources (mainly their material resources) are not sufficient to meet their minimum needs (including social participation)”. She explained that covid 19 has had an impact and will change the picture for poverty in Monmouthshire.

The officer advised that the presentation presented the average picture of poverty across Wales rather than the picture for Monmouthshire specifically, as we are still awaiting local data to provide a useful comparison. She explained that poverty can affect any child at any stage of life and that it may always have been a factor or could be a new factor due to covid. She described some of the impacts on young people which include poorer physical and mental health, poorer achievement and lower life prospects together with other considerations such as whether the child has experienced bullying or problems at home. In terms of child poverty in Monmouthshire overall, whilst the data shows we do not have high levels of deprivation, it doesn’t provide the full picture. She explained that Monmouthshire has pockets of high deprivation and the overarching figure does mask the challenges in those areas. The distribution of pupils in receipt of FSM is also not linear across schools, so in some schools there could be several pupils whilst in others, the number may equal a 3rd of the total pupil numbers. Members heard that early intervention for families is critical and that Flying Start works incredibly well to support very young children to have the best possible start in life. The picture for our young people covered by the Flying Start programme is positive in comparison to Wales, so it does indicate that our children are benefitting from a good start in life. The officer highlighted how pupils in receipt of FSM are impacted by hunger and that feedback from young people suggested there is a stigma in relation to receiving FSM and there needs to be thought given to how to address this. Similarly, uniforms were identified as an issue, particularly more expensive items such as blazers and thought needs to be given to the type of uniform so that it can be affordable to all. Also ‘participation in the life of the school’ has an impact, whereby children may not be able to attend school trips or experiences and simple things like dressing up in costumes can be unaffordable for some families. In relation to laptops and computer devices, the officer explained that whilst the council has rebuilt and distributed hundreds of laptops, we know there is still demand. Housing and homelessness also is a major factor where children may be sharing rooms or have limited opportunities to study. The context around pupils in receipt of FSM is also a key consideration, as we know our numbers are increasing and that for some children, there are other considerations such as children who may be young carers, may be armed forces children, or where English is a second language.

The presentation discussed the action plan in detail, highlighting how each of the strategic objectives were being addressed and members were advised that these objectives linked to the strategic priorities through alignment to the Corporate Plan, the Chief Officer’s Report, the EAS Business Plan and the individual service plans. The next steps would be to reflect on feedback from the select committee and to review the strategy, bringing it back to select committee for endorsement.

The chair thanked the Head of Achievement and Attainment for the very detailed presentation that is available via the meeting page on the council’s website. He invited questions from members.

Member Challenge:

- Given the pandemic and children not being in school, I believe some families have received packed lunches and that some have received monies?

Yes, that is the case. We have made sure the money has gone directly to families. Initially we did offer packed lunches for parents to pick up but that wasn't convenient for them so it's better that it has been given to families to prepare meals at home.

Councillor Powell declared a personal but non-prejudicial interest as a Governor of King Henry VIII School in making the following statement:

- We find that the attainment of pupils in receipt of FSM has improved, so the efforts to better support them are really helping, which is encouraging.

We know that schools are doing their best and part of the presentation is to show that schools can't do this on their own as there are so many other factors and the EAS are providing support to schools and schools are supporting parents. We need to continue to improve this to support these pupils as best we can and the blended learning offer has been helpful for some pupils but it cannot replace the school environment.

- Given that a lot of our concern is whether all of those entitled to FSM are claiming the entitlement, is there an anomaly in the pattern in the increase in take up of FSM at Key stage 3 in comparison to the other keys stages, which wouldn't necessarily be expected? Is there an explanation for that? Is it a change in take up or poverty patterns?

You are quite right and it's difficult to see if parents have decided at that stage to choose a different option or whether perhaps children at this stage feel they are too embarrassed to be receiving FSM. This stage of transition in going to secondary school can be quite difficult. It's a complex situation but we hope to have more data very soon to clarify this which would help us to increase take up.

- In the presentation, school trips were mentioned and it is very sad to hear that children were unable to go on a trip due to affordability. Is there any way that Parent Teacher Associations could collect money for low income families to provide a funding source?

Schools have a Pupil Development Grant which they could use for this but it is for the schools to determine how that money is spent. We are beginning to look at the cost of a school day, which would encompass the cost of a trip, or dressing up for an event such as Red Nose Day or World Book Day and we are factoring in activities where rather than parents having to provide the materials, the schools could facilitate that. The Chepstow cluster are looking at this at the moment and we will be talking to all the heads about this in due course.

- In relation to school uniforms, are parents made aware of the recycling of uniforms prior to children transitioning to comprehensive school?

They are advised of the scheme, but this does need further consideration, particularly for expensive items such as blazers.

- I recall a long standing stigma related to FSM and from my own experience, I have seen how easily children in receipt of FSM can be identified through queuing systems. Is it possible to devise a system where payment is in advance and pupils are issued with tokens so that pupils are indistinguishable in respect of those who have paid or are in receipt of FSM?

This issue does appear frequently and in many different ways from token systems to supply teachers calling the register and then listing pupils in receipt of FSM separately, so I agree that we do need to think about how we address this. The token system is also unfair in that there are restrictions on the value of items purchased which would mean a pupil may not be able to afford a healthy meal and this is an unexpected consequence of what we are trying to achieve.

- I think there is a need to consider any way in which a child in receipt of FSM could be identified. For example, if they receive textbooks free, other pupils may question this so I think careful thought needs to be given to every part of the system. It's a question of how you provide the support without people knowing.

You are right, we need to fully consider every aspect and do this by putting ourselves in the shoes of a child in receipt of FSM and think about how they would feel and what might work and what wouldn't and asking our children what is helpful. We had some feedback about whether we should call it FSM and whether calling it a grant would help because it implies an element of choice. We do need to do more work around this, but you are correct.

Councillor Groucutt declared a personal but non prejudicial interest as a Governor of King Henry VIII School before asking the following question:

- I am the link governor for children in receipt of FSM and vulnerable children at King Henry and I am well aware of the huge investment of time by the school in terms of supporting children and closing the gaps and the school has now reached a point where it is wondering what else it can do as the gap is still there. The latest document containing support strategies is lengthy and it shows that schools really need to think hard about this. Some of the findings of the research in this document are stark in terms of how we are able to close the gap, in that it suggests even when parents and carers have high aspirations for these children, it is the poverty aspect that is the overwhelming force in their lives that will undermine their potential. This has been echoed in your presentation and I feel the gap between the privileged and those in poverty is getting wider. Should our FSM strategy look to address issues such as the increase in the number of activities that are being charged for, such as visits, which are inaccessible to children from disadvantaged backgrounds?

Schools have the opportunity to fund these through the Pupil Development Grant, but we are looking at how schools are spending this and talking to them about their use of this grant, as activities which may seem inexpensive when considered singularly, do add up quickly.

- We have heard in many meetings recently that not all pupils have had the opportunity to learn from home because they did not have the necessary equipment. I know that the council has made great efforts to provide laptops, but are we in a position where we can categorically say that we know how many families are still unable to learn from home or have difficulty doing so? Until we address this, the gap in my view will only continue to widen.

We are confident that our schools know who the children that are struggling are. Whether they all have devices or not is difficult to gauge but we are still receiving requests and we're doing our best to meet those as best we can. We know the pressure these families are under and going forward, there will be families with different levels of needs and we need to think of them almost as individual cases.

- Co-opted Member Maggie Harris: Unfortunately this question was inaudible and could not be minuted. The officer attempted an answer.

With regard to the uptake of FSM, as a local authority, we can look to address the take up and to make sure that everyone that is eligible applies. It is disappointing that the breakfast option has had poor take up and some schools have provided a bag for children to take home at the end of the day to have the following morning.

Chairs Conclusion:

I'd like to offer thanks to our Head of Achievement and Attainment for bringing this detailed report to us for thorough consideration. We often think of Free School Meals in its literal context, however, we can now appreciate that it has much wider implications. The select committee has listened and learnt much more about this topic. We posed questions around how best we could provide people with support during covid 19 by offering families money to provide meals. We also talked in detail about the Pupil Deprivation Grant and how we could work with schools to ensure this is spent in the best possible way. We discussed school trips, visits and activities, uniforms and computer equipment and we recognised that whilst there are difficulties in masking which children are children in receipt of FSM, we need to undertake a forensic examination of each and every process and discuss what would work with pupils and with schools to avoid stigmatising children. As a council, we must seek to put in place strategies to support children and families. We welcome the return of this strategy at the appropriate juncture.

4. Next Meeting: Tuesday 9th March 2021 at 10.00am.

The meeting ended at **4.05 pm**