

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Children and Young People Select Committee held at Remote Meeting on Tuesday, 8th December, 2020 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

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

County Councillors: M.Groucutt, M.Lane and M. Powell

Officers in Attendance

Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Will McLean, Chief Officer for Children and Young People
Sharon Randall-Smith, Head of Achievement and Attainment
Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Mike Moran, Community Infrastructure Coordinator
Matthew Lewis (Countryside), Interim Performance, Evaluation and Programme Development Lead for MonLife
Ian Saunders, Chief Operating Officer, MonLife

APOLOGIES: County Councillors J.Watkins and F. Taylor, and F. Middleton.

1. Declarations of Interest

Chair Councillor Thomas declared a non-prejudicial interest as a governor of Ysgol Gymraeg Y Fenni.

2. Public Open Forum

No members of the public were present.

3. Review of Play Provision: To consider the findings of an assessment of play areas in Monmouthshire and consider the way forward

Officers Mike Moran presented the report and answered the members' questions, with additional responses from Matthew Lewis.

Challenge:

Clearly, there is a lack of resources for keeping play equipment up to scratch. Learning and mixing among pre-school children will be lost with the end of traditional playgrounds, disadvantaging the children as they grow up. It will be a very sad day when alternative uses are implemented.

We don't think the situation is quite as bad as that. There has been some frustration over the years at the lack of a dedicated play budget but the officers see this as a positive way forward because it means we can attract funding to put into those play areas that will remain. Taking Monmouth as an example, we aren't talking about taking out play areas, but a rationalisation process so that we do have good quality neighbourhood play areas with equipment made from

sustainable hardwoods, with a much higher educational value than some of the current equipment.

At last year's Playmaker conference, we asked the year 5 children if they would prefer to play on a fixed space or a green area: the vast majority said they would prefer a green space. We are talking about reducing the number we have and investing in those that remain to make them much better. Many of the areas we inherited in 1996 and 1974 from the predecessor authorities were in a bad state even then. These tend to be on former local authority housing estates – we aren't proposing the removal of these play areas, but investing money to make them better places for children to play, and bringing in sensory planting and landscape features as research shows that these help to encourage autistic children to participate in play. We're trying to link nature with play.

In terms of finance, we are going to spend £110k on the new Chippenham play area, last year we spent £86k in Wyesham, and this year we have accessed another £70k to invest. So this is about having a plan so that when resources become available we can apply for them, and once we have reported on the outcome of the Monmouth pilot we are hopeful that Welsh Government will realise that we're trying to benefit the less well off in our 4 main towns.

Yes, it's very sad to discuss this in the context of a lack of funding. I worry about what we will do with green spaces – these might be requested by year 5 children but what about swings etc. for younger ones?

This is about looking at play through a different lens. It is not to diminish the value of fixed play areas. We have perhaps fallen into the trap in recent years of not creating playable environments in a wider sense. So we are looking at what the value can be of both fixed play and the wider environment, which is perhaps more varied and has opportunities for wild play. We are also approaching this through the lens of 'Play Value', which is a relatively recent concept: in the past, a play area was assessed on whether it had a slide and swing, but there is now a lot of science around the wider value those facilities give to children. There are wider challenges but the focus is more quality rather than quantity, and we're looking to try that in the real world and see where it takes us.

Would it not be better to look at play areas during the planning stage of the estates?

The point about new developments is very important. We do intervene at the planning stage. When the Wonastow estate was developed at Monmouth, using the 6-acre standard 4 play areas would have been needed – we said to the developer that this would be too many and asked if instead they could install 2 or 3 and use the remaining funding to improve existing areas. Although the site manager thought this was a very good idea, the company directors wanted to be able to say they had paid for the new areas. Getting involved at the planning stage to ensure new areas are built but also secure funding for existing areas would be the ideal scenario.

How will the open space areas be maintained? Will local communities and volunteers play a role?

One of the reasons for suggesting the pilot in Monmouth is that there is a group there called Action on Climate Emergency, and Friends groups for local play areas. We anticipate a strong input from the voluntary sector and those organisations.

Does consultation at a local level feature?

We wouldn't seek to do anything without full consultation, the first people we would speak to town councils. They have previously been very supportive. If we can put the argument to them in the right way, they might be willing to contribute to some of the proposals we put forward.

Could you ask for the 2 open space areas to also have a 20-year maintenance? It might be less radical for the developers than 40-year maintenance on 2 standard play areas?

We also ask a community to maintain the green open spaces on estates as well. It's only for 20 years. We would have to consult with legal as to whether we could specify a longer period. We would certainly be in favour of that. We've worked on retaining open spaces in the county, establishing more protected fields than probably any other authority in Wales – we're up to 24 now. Open spaces are becoming more precious now given the pressure from residential developments.

We understand that there might be reticence to close some play areas but we aren't talking about reducing a huge amount. If we reduce across the county 20 or 25 out of 110, and replace them with really good quality play areas that do offer a high level of play value, it wouldn't mean estates going without a play area, it would just mean that the remaining play areas are in good condition, and we have better facilities to maintain them into the future.

Chair's Summary:

As a town and county councillor, I feel reasonably optimistic about this report. Some areas will be closed, but others will be raised to a much higher standard. The overall wish of the committee is for good play provision across the authority, and that all children have fairly close provision. Some members are concerned about the cut in play provision due to austerity. Councillor Powell feels more optimistic, noting that green spaces are good for encouraging children to use their imaginations for play, while agreeing that developers should give their play budget to the council to make a better playground for all ages, rather than putting in a small playground themselves, which is only suitable for toddlers. Councillor Brown raised important issues about play at the planning stage, including the effect that small gardens have on the need for plentiful play provision.

We accept this report but will monitor the matter closely and look for very good play provision in the areas where it remains. We certainly hope there will not be a large cut in the number of areas.

4. Welsh Medium Education: To discuss the strategic plan for Welsh Education

Sharon Randall-Smith delivered the presentation and answered the members' questions with Will McLean.

Challenge:

5.1 of the report mentions a 35% capital contribution from Monmouthshire but isn't the contribution from Welsh Government 100% for Welsh medium schools?

We'll have to verify the Welsh medium position with Welsh Government. Certainly, the element that we submitted for Band B around Abergavenny included Welsh medium provision, which was funded at the 65-35% intervention rate. Since then, Welsh Government has provided grant funding at 100% aside from Band B, for us to provide additional capacity in the Monmouth area and to expand Ysgol Y Ffin in the south of the county. There is funding at 100% but not within the Band B stream.

There are resource implications – Is Welsh Government fully funding these proposals, particularly in light of the problems we have with our budget on a continuous basis?

This is a matter that has been raised in other local authorities: that it does bring potential revenue pressure that isn't funded separately from the capital funding – so they don't fund money for the capital alongside money for the revenue. Money to educate the children is fed to us through our aggregate external finance, and we raise money locally through council tax. It's a matter of us finding a strategic way through that balances where the children are educated and meeting that cost. The difficulty is that if our establishment is for English medium, but then we have a growing population demand for Welsh medium, we have to find the means by which we can fund the move from the English medium to the Welsh medium, without it having too big a head cost in terms of the Welsh medium in the early stages.

Does the 35% capital contribution relate to Abergavenny, and 100% is for Monmouth?

Yes, 100% is for Ysgol Y Ffin and the 65-35% is in regards to Abergavenny.

What provision will be available for ALN pupils who don't make progress – will they automatically go back into the English school?

Yes, it's an important question, especially regarding the availability of services available through the medium of Welsh. The strength of us working regionally: we have made rapid steps over the last 18 months in how we develop and share information. So everything for the new bill (supporting evidence, documentation) is all through the medium of Welsh. Training has been delivered in Welsh for ALN and we are very mindful, through recruitment, that we are looking for people who have the skills needed to help and support children with ALNs, but can do so in Welsh. For example, one of our SpLD team members is Welsh speaking, so can work through both mediums. We are not where we need to be, because of the recruitment issues we face, but we are working on it together as a region. We are trying to establish where we have expertise in certain areas that can be shared. Over time, we will have more Welsh speakers who are skilled and can provide that support.

What are the implications for Welsh-speaking children who choose to go to an English school at secondary level?

We have spoken to lots of parents about transferring from primary into secondary. It's difficult for parents in Caldicot to travel, for example. We now have two Welsh-medium secondary schools that we feed into. The rates of transfer are not as high as we would have hoped. Not everyone is taking the decision to transfer. We hope that as we now have provision in the north and south that is accessible, over time the rates will change, and more parents will be encouraged to take the decision to put their children into Welsh-medium education at the earliest point, and to continue it through to the end of secondary. We're looking to early years and childcare to bolster that as well.

If a child needs advice from a clinician about their learning difficulties, can that be guaranteed yet in Welsh?

The regional approach is strengthening the opportunities to deliver any support and assessment for ALNs in Welsh. The clinicians will also look at how they can do that, too, because there will be more pupils speaking Welsh and expecting to access services in Welsh. The regional work does so closely with the clinicians in order to develop the services, and all of the assessment materials have been completed through the medium of Welsh. So everything will be in place to

support schools. It will take a little more time with clinicians; it is on the agenda, and the regional coordinator will pursue it.

There are a few rare cases where children need hospitalisation because of their needs. During that time, they will receive education in hospital – can that continue to be provided in Welsh, if that's what they are used to?

One of the benefits from the pandemic has been supporting learners at a distance. There are teachers who will be able to support learners in hospital. It's far easier now for children to access learning through English or Welsh wherever they are – we plan to continue to develop that with our regional partners.

Will English remain compulsory?

The consultation is out at the moment: the question from Welsh Government is do we need to make English language compulsory for the foundation phase or can both languages be developed side by side, so that children have confidence in both and can switch between them more easily. The question is, if English doesn't become compulsory until age 7, will that have an impact on standards of English at a later stage – this is the point of the consultation. The consultation closed on 4th December; any information on it will be sent to members.

What will be the impact on border schools i.e. if there's a choice between a local secondary school and one in England?

Schools are concerned about Welsh language; however, being able to speak two languages throughout life is beneficial no matter what someone is doing, not least as it is then easier to learn a third or fourth language. As a local authority, something that we can support schools with is to promote those benefits. We've increased how we promote them (websites, promotional information developed and shared throughout the region, etc.). The information will be available at the point of new housing, as and when those developments are up and running. There are concerns but hopefully they can sort themselves out to a certain extent over time.

Regarding parental demand: what is the consultation on the need and requirement for schools?

The point of WESP for any local authority is that we are there to promote, develop and increase the Welsh language. One of the barriers to some families moving into Wales is if they have a child that is ready to go into reception but they also have a child in Year 2 or 4, they might want them to go into Welsh education but it will be late for that older child as a latecomer. Regionally, we need to find our solution to that.

The evidence in Monmouthshire is mixed. We have two schools very close to the border – Chepstow and Monmouth – and pressures around perception of Welsh education differ in both of those towns. We have had extensive discussions with members of the public in Chepstow over the years about certain aspects of the Welsh curriculum, but in Monmouth, there is a significant influx of learners from England. The dynamic on the border is not a universal one. We want our children to attend Monmouthshire schools whether they are Welsh or English medium.

Presumably, being able to teach in the medium of Welsh and cover a particular subject is quite a high requirement?

Many of our teachers have engaged in the sabbatical, which gives us the opportunity to be able to teach in Welsh, and in a Welsh school. However, we have a huge uptake in professional learning in Welsh as a second language in our schools, and when you visit our schools you can see that. It means that we are able to have confidence that Welsh language is developing. A

recruitment issue could potentially arise if we don't have enough Welsh speakers who enter the teaching profession, particularly at secondary level to deliver certain subjects that are in a shortage area anyway – we will look to support this strongly.

Chair's Summary:

This morning's discussion has highlighted some of the issues. There are quite strong targets to meet in an authority that is predominantly English speaking, sitting close to a border that undoubtedly has an influence. We have covered capital issues and important questions regarding Welsh-medium ALN provision – this is an important area, touching on clinicians within Aneurin Bevan Health Board. This is more difficult than in, say, Cardiff. The transfer from Key Stage 2 into 3 was also addressed: ultimately, this comes down to parental choice. It is heartening to have two thriving Welsh medium schools, with the prospect of a third coming at primary level. There are undoubtedly issues around staffing; teachers in Newport's Welsh schools probably commute in from Cardiff. It is encouraging that staff have engaged in the sabbatical, and that so many teaching colleagues have decided to improve or work on Welsh as a second language. WESP will press us to get up to 30% receiving Welsh medium education by 2031 and 40% by 2050.

5. Children and Young People Select Committee Forward Work Plan

The next meeting is 19th January, looking at Budget scrutiny. There will be a Welsh medium education workshop on 28th January. 11th February, EAS and Free School Meals will be covered. It is agreed that two agenda items per meeting works best.

6. Council and Cabinet Work Planner

7. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes were confirmed and signed as an accurate record.

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

19th January 10.00am, with a pre-meeting at 09.30.

The meeting ended at **11.38 am**