

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Children and Young People Select Committee held at Remote Meeting on Thursday, 25th March, 2021 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

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

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

Officers in Attendance

Will McLean, Chief Officer for Children and Young People
Sharon Randall-Smith, Head of Achievement and Attainment
Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Charlie-Jade Atkins, Youth Worker
Josh Klein, Youth and Community Officer

APOLOGIES: County Councillor J.Watkins

1. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

2. Public Open Forum

No members of the public were present.

3. Young People's Mental Health: To discuss with the Youth Service children and young people's concerns around mental health.

Charlie-Jade Atkins and Josh Klein presented the report and answered the members' questions.

Challenge:

What sort of information are young people after, in terms of relationships and sex education, problems of body image and social media, respect and consent, etc.? How can we help with that?

We recently had a very good conversation with a young person in a secondary school, who had sent an email to their headteacher voicing concerns and feedback about sex education. We met with her and it was very insightful. She was alarmed at her friends' lack of knowledge. The areas discussed were: being safe physically and emotionally, contraception and protection, how to get to know the person one is with, peer pressures, family values, who to talk to in order to have good conversations, feelings of guilt and shame, the complexity of female pleasure, expectations and self-esteem, anatomical correctness, and the effect of social media such as Instagram. We have worked with a lot of young people during lockdown who have issues with self-esteem and body image, to the point where some of the people we saw in person prior to lockdown chose not to interact with us via video calls. Our online consent form includes a choice for how young people wish to interact with us; a lot of them have decided that they would prefer

to do so by phone call or text, rather than video call. This applies to girls and boys. Revenge porn and sexting are other big concerns, as is knowing where to go for help, information and contraception, as well as consent, managing risks, and the consequences of not doing so.

It's great that they are so aware of what they want. Sexual health clinics could be much less degrading and clinical. Perhaps a sub-group would be useful to work on these matters?

The young people are already having these conversations and are looking for someone to talk to – the Friday Friendlies have begun to serve this purpose. This would be a good place for councillors to attend and join the conversations. Cabinet Member Sara Jones recently attended one on Gender Equality, giving her the chance to speak and listen to the young people, which was very helpful.

Martyn: When we talk about sex and relationships education, one thing we see time and again when things reach a crisis point with violence against women, is that the perpetrators are male. There is a huge problem with a gender divide. Looking to the new curriculum in Wales, there is a big role for youth organisations to be in schools and influence what is taught.

We are working on the Participation and Shift projects, through which we are seeing things first-hand. Perhaps there aren't enough of us working on these areas. Development of the new curriculum is a great opportunity for the Youth Service to be involved. We have been invited to the meeting of the secondary school staff responsible for developing SMRSE: we are going to identify gaps in provision at Key Stage 3 and 4, look at what young people in the area are telling us, what the needs are that have been identified by the school, and we are going to develop bespoke packages, as the new curriculum dictates. These conversations are in the early stages now.

Regarding the recommendations, something we can help with is to call those who collaborate on dealing with adolescent mental health (Aneurin Bevan, Mind, etc.) to come to this committee and answer our questions?

The data from sex ed. table and young people's opinions at the Youth Conference in January have been fed back to the Welsh Youth Parliament, which fed back to the curriculum group. So much of what we've discussed in terms of young people's needs has been fed back directly.

You mentioned 'family values' – will there be an emphasis on strong and stable relationships, as there has been in the past?

Something we try to do is develop young people's resilience, and ensure they have the right networks and support. We would hope that all of that would be encapsulated in what we hope to develop, yes.

Domestic violence being included is very important. Healthy relationships include respect and non-violence. It's important that strong and stable relationships are included, beyond just biological knowledge.

Yes, one of the themes that came through from the young people was that it wasn't so much the biological side that they wanted to know about, but everything else. We will make a note of that.

Young people being persuaded to take photographs of themselves, which then go online, is a big concern. Do we have people who can help the young people before they get into trouble?

Yes, youth work is all about listening to people, without judgement. We have had a lot of feedback in recent years about 'Sexting', and there are very good resources out there. When we speak to young people and parents about this problem, the legalities around it shock them i.e. if a young person who is under 18 takes a photo of themselves, they are 'producing an

indecent image of a child' in doing so, and sending it is then classed as 'distribution', and the recipient is in 'possession'. When these issues first came to the fore in recent years, the Police went into schools, approaching the problem from the criminal side, but eventually, as more has been understood, education has come to have the biggest impact on young people. It is positive that Revenge Porn is now in legislation as illegal.

What is the contact with our Mental Health team, and their initiatives such as the Iceberg Project?

The Shift project, and the specific mental health and wellbeing work that we do, is specifically non-clinical, using youth work methodologies and interventions. We have a great network around us of mental health specialists e.g. we have done a lot of work with Papyrus, a group that addresses suicide. We have an excellent database of organisations from which we can seek advice, share referrals, etc. The framework is very much there for 11-18 and we are getting there for 18-25. Any other suggestions for people to work with would be very welcome.

Chair's Summary:

The members have all benefitted greatly from this update are very grateful to the team for its work.

Sub-groups will be useful for a number of these areas, as suggested by Councillor Dymock. We need to do what the young people want, not what the Council thinks they want. Councillor Groucott raised the point about sexual violence, which is a great concern – we need to tackle this, and the underlying contributing attitudes. Linking up with Aneurin Bevan and Mind etc. on this is a good idea. He suggested further that perhaps once a year, we could have a dedicated CYP committee where the wishes and needs of young people form the basis, or the young people could even run the committee. Members spoke of the importance of strong and stable relationships. Councillor Penny Jones mentioned the mental health team and contributing to Friday Friendlies sessions, including talking to the young people about politics, and how they can bring about change in society.

We accept the recommendations, and offer our support to the youth service. We should foster closer links between MCC and E2C, using the latter as a method of engagement with the young people of Monmouthshire to inform agendas and decision-making. The door to CYP will always be open, and we are very happy to participate in the Friday Friendlies, if that would be useful. We will build an annual report from the youth service into the work programme.

4. Feedback from Estyn: Verbal update from the Chief Officer on the feedback from Estyn recently communicated to the Council.

Will McLean spoke to the members and answered their questions.

The letter that we have received from Estyn captures very well the work that we, our schools, and EAS colleagues have done, to ensure the transition throughout this period has been as effective as possible. The letter is in two segments: March-August 2020 and September 2020 onwards. Spring 2021 has been a period of lockdown and remote learning for many, and Estyn will continue their work with us to assess and discuss how that period of time has been managed as well. We have maintained our half-termly Local Authority Link Inspector visits, to ensure the Inspectors understand our position and the decisions we are taking.

Some things to draw out from the letter: in terms of Leadership and Collaboration, we are pleased about their recognition of our communication and clear expectations for schools, and that members have been kept up to date with events as they have unfolded. The quality of questions and level of challenge from members has been good.

There are interesting reflections about how we have worked with the schools. We have never had a 'one size fits all' approach – we recognise that each of them has a different set of pressures, building layout, community, etc. We have set clear parameters and expectations for schools but then given them the flexibility to respond as best fits their local needs.

The letter discusses our decision about the end of term; our children came back for three weeks in the summer, meaning we didn't have the extra week of holiday in the autumn term. Schools were only allowed 30% pupil capacity at that time. In essence, children missed one day at the end of the summer term but gained 5 days in autumn. Because of low transmission levels in Monmouthshire, many of our children had an uninterrupted autumn term. The letter recognises that this wouldn't have an equal impact on learners, which we have addressed in our planning and expectations.

Another positive is that Estyn spoke to our schools, who said that they felt well supported by us. The paper also recognises the good work undertaken by colleagues in education and social services to ensure that the needs of the more vulnerable learners were met. It talks about the supply of technology to ensure that blended learning was effective, and the way in which childcare hubs were established, and places were guaranteed for those children who would need them. Now, with a little hindsight, we can recognise that speed with which our colleagues worked, the commitment they showed, and how they worked alongside headteachers. Speedy establishment of childcare hubs was a very good example of our commitment to joint working.

The document is very positive about our relationship with EAS. We have been clear throughout the pandemic that we have different roles: the role of the local authority has been to support schools, 'tactical responses', etc., while EAS has provided the right levels of professional learning to enable blended learning to develop significantly, and also to make sure that the leaders met the challenge. There has been excellent sharing of information on a weekly basis.

This committee has shown concern about how devices have been managed. This document was written a little while ago; the figures for the number of devices that have been provided are now significantly higher than this, and the procurement challenges referenced in the letter have been eased somewhat.

There are positive indicators of our support for vulnerable learners: 84% of identified vulnerable learners took up the offer of places in school hubs; of the remaining 16%, parents of some children with complex needs took the decision to keep those children at home. We continued our work up to the end of the summer term and began the transition to return in September. This was an important moment, as the stability we could afford across the school system meant that many of our children had uninterrupted periods in school. We have benefitted from lower transmission rates than other regions, but the investment in time that we put in in the spring and summer terms was rewarded in the autumn term.

The letter recognises our work to support the wellbeing of Headteachers. We contacted a former headteacher and brought him back as someone that current headteachers could talk to about their issues, which was very well-received by the heads.

We've continued with our work with some of the schools that have been in processes of schools causing concern, to ensure they feel fully supported and engaged. Events put on by our schools this term to provide members with an insight into what blended learning looks like have been very positive for all involved. Everyone should be proud of how they have delivered blended learning so effectively, under such time pressures.

Whereas summer term involved providing childcare, the focus this term was on providing education. Working with schools, we have identified vulnerable learners who have continued to receive face-to-face learning throughout, while numbers of critical worker children in our schools have remained high. We give great thanks to all of our colleagues and governing bodies, and look forward now to re-opening schools fully from 12th April. Hopefully, measures in place regarding Lateral Flow Testing for teachers and enhanced social distancing measures continued to keep rates low – we have not yet had a positive Lateral Flow result.

Challenge:

Has anything emerged from the second wave that has added to the complications in young people's lives, especially pertaining to PRU?

PRU provision has been very interesting. Those children were classed as vulnerable learners, so their provision has therefore continued 'face to face' in school, which has been very positive. The work that PRU does to support children in our centres and in-reach provision has been very important. Those children will often face multiple layers of challenge in their education. We have seen some advantages, e.g. remote and blended learning has been a benefit. The current pressures around PRU concern the capacity for it to meet the needs of a growing population. There has been a bit of disruption, i.e. from moving to a new building in Abergavenny, but the service has responded very positively to that. As we move into the summer term, we will take the time to work very closely with our learners to understand where there might still be deficits and what we can do differently to address those.

Classroom learning is preferable. With blended learning, has there been guidance for staff about screen time lasting for too long, given the stress it can take on the teachers' eyes?

We have worked closely with our schools around teacher wellbeing. We meet the Professional Associations fortnightly (it was weekly at the height of the pandemic). Many of our schools have a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous learning, so some of the day will be live teaching and some will be tasks set ahead of time. We have tried to balance those two elements. Our schools have adopted different approaches e.g. two have moved to 100 minute lessons, entailing a teacher being live at the start, set the activities etc., then the live element stops and the asynchronous element takes over, with the teacher perhaps checking in at the end.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to the Chief Officer for his and his team's efforts during this most difficult time, as well as anyone who has worked in or with the education sector. We, the parents and pupils are very glad that the children are now returning to school. We have noted concerns about PRU, and the difficulties of teaching online. A second year with no exams will be a huge challenge.

5. Children and Young People Select Forward Work Plan

The draft Annual Report will come to the next meeting. Consideration of FSM children and those from families with lower incomes would be useful in the near future. Following up on the work of

the Youth Service will be explored, with the suggestion of one item per meeting for those issues.

6. Cabinet and Council Work Planner

7. To confirm the minutes of the previous meetings held on :

- 19th January 2021
- 11th February 2021

The minutes were confirmed and signed as an accurate record.

8. To confirm the date and time of the next meeting as 20th April 2021

The meeting ended at **12.10 pm**