

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Children and Young People Select Committee held at Remote Meeting on Tuesday, 20th April, 2021 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

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

County Councillors: L.Brown, L.Dymock,
M.Groucutt 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

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. Annual Report of the Chief Officer for Children and Young People: To scrutinise the performance of the work of the directorate over the past year and the forward direction

Will McLean delivered the report and answered the members' questions.

Challenge:

The Health Service is likely to be overwhelmed by wider demands following the pandemic. If we are already not meeting with it as effectively as possible, how can better links with Health be guaranteed after the pandemic?

We had a recent Headteachers' session, in which we were joined by Dave Williams, Aneurin Bevan's 'DECLO' – dedicated lead for relationships with education, under the new ALN Act. Dave came to talk specifically about how to enhance and improve the relationships, to ensure that we are meeting all of those expectations under the new Act – so it seems that Aneurin Bevan wants to work differently with us. We concur with the pressures that the NHS is going to see. We will need to be very clear about our expectations around therapies etc. for children and young people, how they access them from their SNRB base, our expectations around frequency, attendance, etc. It is at that level that we are keen to work with Aneurin Bevan. Jacquelyn Elias is working very closely with the health board about a revised memorandum of understanding between us and them to ensure that we capture that.

A recurring issue has been the high level of fixed-term exclusions. As children come back to school, and some inevitably exhibit challenging behaviour, how will the team support schools to avoid the number of exclusions rising?

Speaking to some Headteachers, we are already seeing the change going from the very different year we've had into a more traditional setting – this change is indeed challenging for some of our young people, and we are already getting reports about challenging behaviours. We recently started a piece of work across our traditional inclusion services, educational psychology team and ALN team, to work through a clear process for our schools to understand the pathway: when children are identified with challenging behaviour, what is the root cause of that behaviour, and how can we help at that level? For example, with emotionally based school avoidance, there will be emotionally-based behaviours as well, as alluded to in the presentation.

Has the process started yet of trying to capture the brilliant new practice that has emerged?

Yes, some of the changes have been incredible. Some of the ways that schools have thought about things differently will be continued: the adaptations that have been made, the changes to curricula, changes in delivery to groups, the use of space, and more, will carry on in the future. It has been an interesting point of time: we knew the new curriculum was coming, but it was then delayed due to the pandemic, allowing schools to meet their learners' needs as locally determined, which now allows them to move smoothly from the current delivery into the new curriculum delivery. A huge amount of activities and ways of working will continue. One example is virtual parents' evenings, which will almost certainly be retained into the future, and we will work very closely with EAS to ensure those continuities.

Regarding Compass For Life, is there overlap with the Inspire programme, and will that be supported in the future?

Yes, there is a clear link between Compass For Life and the Inspire programmes. There can be a continuum. Something about which we're hopeful for Compass For Life is that the engagement in years 5 and 6 allows for the impetus to be carried through into secondary school. If that means that some of the learners working with Inspire have a language and means by which they can articulate what they want to achieve to those professionals they work with at secondary school, then that's a huge benefit. There is no news for today about future funding but given how well regarded those interventions are by our secondary schools we will look to support that in any way we can. It's also worthwhile to note that in the recent tweaks to SLT, as Chief Officer for Children and Young People I will have a closer commission and directional role with regard to some of the youth services than we've had up until now. I'm looking forward to working closely with colleagues in MonLife to ensure that what we learn and understand from schools can be acted on by those groups.

How can we best support teachers going forward, especially as they face a challenging time with re-introducing children to school?

It's important for schools to have the time to understand the scale of the challenges that they face. We know that some of the behaviours aren't where we want them to be. We need to continue being very supportive and ensuring that our interventions are proportionate and measured, and not step back into undue expectations. We need to ensure that the work we do with the schools adds value, try to lift the burden off them so that they have the time and energy to invest in their learners – which they always do – and that with the resources they now have, that they can make investments to improve things for their learners. We will work through the

effect on children of changing dynamics as a result of the pandemic in the coming months. I have upcoming visits to many of our schools scheduled – it will be very useful to see how the children have responded, and how they are doing.

A number of pupils have improved since being isolated at home. It will be interesting to see if they continue that mindset once they return to school.

We've already seen that some learners have benefitted from learning at home. For children who struggled to go to school, the recent period will have been an advantage to them – some will have felt more secure at home. We need to be careful that we don't say that is better for everyone to be back at school, categorically. In our Education Other Than At School provision (EOTAS), we are now seeing the benefits of our blended learning model, and we will see this develop over time.

Is it correct to say that not that many children are excluded but rather the same children are excluded frequently?

With the work by Richard Austin and his colleagues, we record the number of incidents, the length of the exclusions, the number of children affected, etc., and, yes, there are sometimes concentrations among a small number of children. But, as Councillor Groucott noted, in recent years we have seen rates of fixed-term exclusion in some schools that are too high.

Some children will be very thankful to return to school, as they come from disrupted or difficult homes.

It's really positive for us to have a close eye on our learners. Our biggest concern during the pandemic was, for those children that we thought might be vulnerable, we wouldn't be able to engage with them every day. Schools put a huge amount of effort into phone and video calls, to get a good sense of how the children were doing. It's only now, as the children return, that we will understand the effect of their time away. We are at the very early stages of that.

In terms of supporting pupils and teachers, would postponing the new curriculum be a good idea, while there is pressure for pupils and schools to find their feet again?

The curriculum for Wales has been passed into law now, so we are committed to enacting it. There will be significant change to education leadership in Welsh Government after the election: we know that the current minister isn't standing and there will be a new director of education in Wales. Some of our more experienced teachers have worked when they didn't have a national curriculum; that, in essence, is what we are moving back to, in that the curriculum will be designed and created at a school level. The more experienced teachers will therefore be invaluable in helping the younger members of staff to develop that, while those younger members will continue to be a support when it comes to the more technological aspects of practice, as it has developed. Those two facets will leave us in a very strong position.

Is Compass For Life tailored to a type of career guidance? Would that include looking at other options within a field in which a child states an interest?

Compass For Life is about not giving children a perspective that, very early in their lives, they might not be able to do something. It's hugely important that children are able to articulate their interests and aspirations. The compass's four cardinals need to be kept in balance. Once a child has articulated what they would like to do they then have to work through that process of understanding the steps that they need in order to get there: what they need to achieve in school, the subjects they need to study, necessary work experience, etc. 'East' on the compass provide the value set, that guides them through the journey and 'West' concerns the resilience

needed to go in search of that. Resilience includes adapting and changing a goal when necessary.

The report identifies 85 vulnerable learners. What is the nature of the difference in acceptance from schools, and what happened to the others?

I can share a detailed answer to this to all members outside the meeting. Those learners who didn't accept continue to be in close contact with their schools. School and social services colleagues continue to engage with all of the children to ensure they are being supported effectively.

The new arrangements for Centre-Determined Grades are a burden on teachers this year. What arrangements are being made to allow, where necessary, teachers time off timetable to deal with them?

Throughout the last year, we have had frequent engagement with colleagues in the Trade Unions. It was weekly at the height of the pandemic, and it is now a fortnightly meeting. I am very grateful for the way in which our Union colleagues have worked with us. Typically, the relationship is between the examination centre (the school) and the examination board, and not the local authority – the local authority doesn't have a direct relationship in that engagement. This year, the work done to establish how CDGs will be ascertained has been done through the Design And Delivery group, which includes members from Qualifications Wales and WJEC. The group has worked through this process, in which we have arrived at CDGs. Welsh Government has said that one of the Inset Days this year can be used to prepare for CDGs, but those days were to prepare for the new curriculum and other challenges, so they need to be careful about that balance. Headteachers talk to me frequently about the weight of work that is likely to fall on to schools this year. One of our schools has worked with MonLife: they are providing collapsed timetables – time for other year groups – so that teachers have time to work on the CDGs. There's no 'magic bullet' for us as the local authority but we are aware of the concern, and are working with the schools and at a national level to try to provide additional support to schools.

Regarding the standout figure for Free School Meals pupils in School 3 (p19): what are the plans for drilling down into those results, and determining what can be shared with the other schools?

We always try to capture the best practice, and make other schools aware of it. Our colleagues in EAS will look to identify that good practice, too. Sometimes, given the number of pupils, we can have quite small cohorts, and therefore volatility: one year there might be an outstanding cohort of learners entitled to FSMs, and another year it might not be the same. We will continue to work with schools to understand the cohorts and any additional needs they might have, and share good practice whenever we can.

Chair's Summary:

All members give their gratitude to everyone working in schools during this unprecedented period. Councillor Groucott's comments about linking with Aneurin Bevan are welcome, and the challenges of getting children back into school. It would be good to avoid exclusions as much as possible, given that all children have been excluded from school during the last year. The capture of good practice is very important. Compass For Life is strongly supported. Ongoing support for teachers was raised. Pupils catching up after Covid was raised; this is something we will look at in the future. Children in more challenging circumstances still concern the committee. We must focus our attention on helping them to get back to where they should be.

Councillor Dymock suggested that the committee receive an update from the Chief Officer once he has been out to schools.

4. Children and Young People Select Forward Work Plan

We would like to look at Free School Meals, probably asking Sharon Randall-Smith to update the committee, and young carers. We wish to set up a sub-group for the matters raised by the Youth Service at the last meeting, and are looking for volunteers. The other topic to consider is an update on the new curriculum; Councillor Brown would like to add the matter of whether there should be a postponement, considering Covid.

5. Cabinet and Council Work Planner

6. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes were confirmed and signed as an accurate record.

7. To confirm the date and time of the next meeting as 27th May 2021

The meeting ended at **12.10 pm**