

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Children and Young People Select Committee held at on Thursday, 9th July, 2020 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor T.Thomas (Chairman)
County Councillors: L.Brown, M.Groucutt, L.Jones, D. Jones, M.Lane, M. Powell, J.Watkins,
Also in attendance: P. Strong NEU and M. Harris, Monmouthshire Association of School Governors

Officers in Attendance

Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Will McLean, Chief Officer for Children and Young People
Matthew Gatehouse, Head of Policy and Governance
Sharon Randall-Smith, Head of Achievement and Attainment
Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Debbie Hartevelde, Managing Director EAS
Kirsty Bevan, Director (Standards and Challenge Advisers)
Ed Pryce, Assistant Director EAS

APOLOGIES: None

1. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Powell declared an interest as a Governor at King Henry VIII.

Councillor Hughes-Jones declared an interest as a Governor at Ysgol Gymraeg Y Fenni, Llanvihangel Crucorney and Llanfoist.

Councillor Groucott declared an interest as a Governor at King Henry VIII, and Chair of Governors at Llantilio Pertholey primary school.

Councillor Thomas declared an interest as a Governor at Ysgol Gymraeg Y Fenni.

Councillor Harris declared an interest as a Governor at Deri View primary school.

2. Public Open Forum

No members of the public were present.

3. Reflections on the Monmouthshire's schools through the COVID-19 Lockdown and the return to school in the summer. Verbal Update - Will McLean

Chief Officer Will McLean gave a general update. Following the announcement in March, the Government announced support for vulnerable learners and childcare for key worker children. Monmouthshire responded to that request very well. All of our schools have delivered those two critical aspects. The method of delivery of childcare was through Hub schools – that model worked really well. We looked at the demand in each town, the local authority took responsibility for identification and registration of childcare. There are areas of significant demand in certain places e.g. two hubs were run in Abergavenny, at Llanfoist Fawr and Deri View, due to there

being a district general hospital; in the south of the county there were hubs in Rogiet and Dewstow, with a further hub in Thornwell, one in Monnow in Monmouth, and Raglan school opened to support the county's rural centre. School clusters working to support hubs has been one of the biggest positives of this period. We've seen a greater level of collaboration in our clusters, with enhanced personal relations between some of the headteachers. For the Easter holidays, Monlife provided support – teachers therefore had the opportunity to step away from school. Monlife provided a combination of youth work, outdoor education and sports development. This was very well received by parents and children.

In the summer term the seven hubs were retained but it became apparent that the Secondary schools wanted to open to offer support to their vulnerable learners and key worker children. We therefore stood up 11 hubs. We decided to provide childcare up to Year 8. There was a very low uptake compared to primary. The secondary schools were able to put into place their own systems and use the time almost as one of soft testing how they would work once there was a return to school. Two of our secondary schools house Special Needs Resource Bases, both of which operated through that period.

On 22nd June, we changed our model in preparation for the return to school on 29th. Every school opened in Monmouthshire for vulnerable learners and key worker children. This allowed the hubs to have a more manageable number of children, and allowed schools to put in place operational plans and to test them. An important point to make is that childcare in this period was a significant pressure on our schools – we had a high number of children accessing the childcare, when compared to authorities of a similar size. 80 children returned in the first week, rising to over 300 by the end. MCC colleagues did very well organising the registration process, and Headteachers did very well managing the balance of key worker children and their significant desire to have as many children return as possible. This was managed without having to say no to anyone regarding childcare provision.

It has therefore been a very challenging period, but everyone involved has risen to the challenge with great success. The Minister for Education is to make an announcement at 12.30 today about future plans.

Sharon Randall-Smith gave a further update regarding learning specifics:

Schools have responded very well to the demands that have been placed on them, particularly with regard to learning. Their first priority was wellbeing, but all were conscious to keep the lines of communication open with pupils and parents to provide learning even at that early stage. Schools were at different relative levels of capability regarding how they could step up to the challenges. But every school had something in place whereby work was being provided to children, and support to the families. Initially, there was a 50% uptake of schools using Hwb; this has increased significantly. There has been a good uptake in professional learning, ensuring that what children are being asked to do will be appropriate and engaging, as well as covering wellbeing. The learning model is coming to fruition now; the learning is of a new kind. Schools have been provided with a huge amount of training and professional learning from our colleagues in the EAS. Engagement has increased in some areas but not in others. There has been helpful feedback from young people, which has been shared with schools: for example, looking at amounts, access to resources, etc.

Schools noted immediately that some children would find it more difficult to engage in the learning offer. Schools have worked directly with parents whose children need additional

resources and were finding it difficult to engage sufficiently. We have cultivated very good relationships with parents.

Some children and parents remain a concern; in those cases have maintained very regular contact. For example, up to three times a week with families in some schools. We have looked at other ways that we can give support. This remains a priority for schools moving forward. There is huge enthusiasm within schools to develop learning; good practice has been shared within hubs very effectively – schools have been working together. Schools have prioritised pupils who are a concern for their ‘catch up and prepare’ sessions. Schools have been clear that they won’t return to the old way as they’ve found so many strengths and made such positive developments in the way they’re delivering learning now; synchronous (i.e. ‘face-to-face’), contact with groups of children, and also a-synchronous learning, where there is flexibility for the learner to engage at whatever is the most appropriate time. Schools have looked at learning as a family, where everyone can learn together, making it a more meaningful experience.

The last few weeks in which the children have gone back to school has been used very well to prepare pupils and staff, offering a comprehensive blended approach as we move towards September and beyond. Support from EAS will continue to be needed.

Challenge:

There is a concern that if not all children are back in September, and online learning is used more and more for them to keep up, the existing achievement gap will increase. Has social services working in tandem with schools been considered? What about volunteer support?

Vulnerable learners are indeed a national concern. We hope that as many pupils as possible are in school in September. There is a necessity to close the gap – this is an existing aim of ours. Regarding digital accessibility: we’ve been working with schools to ensure all children have access to what is needed. We bought and provided 200 personal internet connections (My-Fi), and equipment has been borrowed and lent between schools (around 80 pieces of kit on average, at secondary school level). A very positive outcome is how closely we’ve worked with social services, we’ve been very careful to pay attention to ensuring that the needs of vulnerable children are met.

Regarding volunteers: we met recently with Jill Langford and her team to learn how best we can make use of the range of volunteers available to us, and we met with a core group of headteachers. They wanted time to consider what they would want and need. We’ve spoken about supporting wellbeing: children learn best when wellbeing is high; how we can support delivery, and support families – this is key for stopping that gap from widening. We’ve met weekly with social services to discuss and review supporting provision for children who need support. We’ve utilised EAS to identify any barriers to learning support. Schools have maintained regular contact with vulnerable families, as mentioned earlier. Our Flying Start service has identified families, they know them very well; these have been discussed and we’ve looked at what they need to thrive. The sharing of devices across schools has been very positive. We may need to look at that again as parents return to work.

Regarding borders, and disparities between England and Wales: might there be a problem with childcare if, for example, someone teaches in Wydean but their children access education in Wales? Is there adequate communication to key worker parents about nursery and childcare provision?

There is inevitably a challenge in managing having English schools so close to us. We've worked with the guidance from Welsh government, offered schools the flexibility to interpret that in a way that suits them in their local context. We will continue to do that, so they can make the best use of their facilities and resources (in terms of teaching staff).

We've been able to provide significant childcare throughout this period. Early decisions to extend the remit of our Flying Start offer enabled us to stand up resources effectively, and we've been able to use some private providers. We've been supported by the Welsh Government CCAS scheme, in which the previous 30-hour allowance was suspended, and moved it to support key worker children in this period. It is worthwhile stressing that when we do return to a broader school attendance, it is important that everyone is aware that childcare cannot be provided by our schools.

According to Wales Online there is less availability of online learning in Wales than in the rest of UK. But there is a national platform – are national facilities not all available in Wales?

As a border county, walking the line between Westminster and Cardiff decisions is a continual concern. Hopefully, today's announcement will see our children returning, as in Northern Ireland. We've worked with the guidance from Welsh Government, and worked with schools to interpret it as they need and see fit. Wales was in an advantageous position given the use of Hwb prior to lockdown. England had to rapidly procure a provider, whereas Hwb is specific to Wales, and enables a huge amount of information to be shared, lessons to be created, and provides full access to all pupils in Wales to Microsoft and Google provision. It was provided well in advance of the pandemic.

We've had feedback from parents about synchronous teaching. There may well be more asynchronous provision in some schools; every school will apply the model differently. The latter provides more freedom and is more accessible as it can be utilised whenever is best for the pupil, and therefore creates better results, as studies have shown.

Lots of children don't get statements of additional learning needs. This can take a long time. What provision did we ensure was given to children in the process of receiving one, or missed out on one? What was put in place for them, and will be put in place in the future in case of another lockdown?

We had direct dialogue with parents of children attending SNRBs. For those without a statement, we worked to ensure vulnerable children were identified and supported. It is a challenge to do that, and we continue to look at it. We will reflect on the support we've provided as we prepare for September. We do have to think about potential localised lockdowns, and ensure schools are ready to respond. We continue to work with Welsh Government to ensure we meet the requirements under the ALN legislation; it is difficult because often the provision is identified as being 'at school', and we have to find a way around that.

There will be children who have done as little as possible during this time – how will they be integrated back into the routine of regular school lessons?

The decision by Welsh Government for every pupil to have the opportunity to check in, catch up and prepare is a fundamental part of how we do that. These three weeks of contact time between learners and their schools are vitally important. The three elements are really important: the message from Welsh Government throughout this period has been that welfare and wellbeing have to be the number one priority – that relates to the 'check in' part. The 'catch up' is because clearly we need to understand where our learners are. The third part, 'prepare':

the message we've had from headteachers is that this period is critical to allow the young people to come back and make sure they understand how they access the education and Hwb, how they interact digitally with their school, etc. Our colleagues in education welfare have contacted those learners who need to access school – we know there is a group which will be vulnerable to not doing that. We've been working hard to ensure that continuity. It is important that we don't think of the future as binary, with children either in or out of school – it is likely to be a blend, and this 'prepare' element is vital to how we manage that as we go forward.

What is the status for families where either the parents or children are in the shielding category? pupils going back with medical conditions, or with parents who have them.

Any child in receipt of a shielding letter is not expected to be in school at this time. The same applies to staff, or those who have a close family member in receipt of a letter. Further consideration of the shielding regime will take place in August. We've worked very closely with trade unions, HR colleagues and headteachers about staff returning, or those with underlying conditions remaining at home. We will wait for further guidance about shielding in the future. We're very clear at the moment that children enter into a group in the morning then don't leave it, to keep mixing down and to implement social distancing correctly.

In order to meet social distancing requirements, are leisure facilities being used?

Chepstow and King Henry VIII schools are currently using leisure centres, Monmouth and Caldicot didn't need to. We've begun to prepare contingencies for other locations to ensure social distancing if they are needed in the future, and have identified a number of buildings throughout the authority, though HR and additional staff need to be considered.

Could it be clarified that all pupils have access to I.T.?

I am not currently aware of any cases of I.T. kit not being provided to those who need it. We have been funded by Welsh Government: they brought forward the second tranche of the EdTech fund to furnish children as needed.

Is there further reassurance that the attainment gap will not widen during this period?

The Minister for Education launched a £29m initiative this morning to support more professionals to be brought in for the next academic year to close the gap. Details will come in the coming days. It can be a challenge to find the right staff in the key subjects. But we will await further details from Welsh Government this morning.

Chair's conclusion

We have considered dysfunctional families potentially lacking full resources, and the use of IT. It has been very good to hear that every pupil has had their technical needs met. Issues of border schools and blended learning were considered. We covered the matter of pupils with ALNs, or who haven't been stated. We considered issues regarding shielding. Welsh Government's announcement today will give clarification, and we look forward to that.

4. Preparations for the September 2020 return to school - Debbie Hartevelde & Kirsty Bevan (EAS) and Will McLean

The officers presented their report. The organisational response is three-stage; the first was 'Repurposing', we are currently in the second ('Check in, Catch up, Prepare'), with the third to come in September ('Blended Learning'). Blended Learning is being prepared for, though it is

not known yet exactly what the plan for September will be. School Development Plans will be reviewed in the autumn term.

Challenge:

Do we know the number of hours that parents are expected to help their children with schoolwork? How can the amount of distanced and online work being done by pupils be monitored? There is a concern again about the gap between FSM pupils and others.

The best option would be for as many pupils as possible to be back in September. We will continue to try to stay ahead of the game in terms of integrated and blended learning so that we can build on the practice already established in our schools, when those situations arise. We will ensure that schools are in the best position possible to meet the needs of learners in September.

The relationship between EAS and the local authority has been very constructive and rewarding. The work that has been done stands us in very good stead for the future. The challenges for families will not be restricted to those traditionally thought of as 'vulnerable'. Some households have parents on-call 24 hours a day, or both are working full-time – every household has therefore faced problems and struggles during this period. Every learner needs support, for different reasons.

Chair's conclusion:

Regardless of whatever this afternoon's announcement holds, we have been encouraged by the work EAS has done. We have seen that there is a continuing concern about vulnerable children, and CYP Select committee will continue to monitor this in the future.

5. EAS Value for Money Study - Debbie Hartevelde (EAS)

Assistant Director Pryce delivered a presentation to the committee. The report was written by an external consultant. The review's purpose is to reflect on, and know, what we're doing well, and also know where we need to improve. The review drew on a range of data aggregated across the local authority, and evidence from external experts. The review concluded that EAS is doing the right things and doing them well, and having an impact.

Challenge:

Does Monmouthshire have a generic problem with secondary teaching, as compared to primary performance, or with it not being sustained over time?

Estyn's report agreed that primary improvement has been more rapid than in secondary. Time and attention has been spent to ensure good leadership is now in place at secondary level. Time has been taken to agree between us, the schools and EAS what our expectations for outcomes are (they are at the highest level.) Traditional metrics will unfortunately not be available in the future: first, because of the way exams have been undertaken for this cycle, we won't be using that data in the coming year. Second, the minister has announced that categorisation is not likely to go ahead in the future year. Third, we were going into the year when Estyn was not undertaking inspections. We will have to work with EAS to find a way to give this committee, and the council generally, confidence that our schools are progressing in the right direction.

King Henry VIII school is now supporting another school, which should allow for positive, distributed leadership within that school to be developed. The existing partnership between

Caldicot and Bishop of Llandaff is bearing fruit. We're seeing progress in Chepstow under its new leadership. Monmouth Comprehensive welcomed a new headteacher yesterday – this should stimulate that school. The four secondary schools are therefore well placed to improve in the future.

With fewer staff, has there been more delegation to schools to improve, and how has that altered your method of working?

There are fewer staff in EAS, which is part of our approach to move towards a self-improving system, and enable capacity to be built within the school community. In turn, that increases the delegation and resources into schools. Much of our approach for that is to engage schools to deliver services for other schools, providing appropriate professional learning and quality assurance for that mechanism. This also helps schools to feel very connected to our work. It is logical for practitioners in schools to be the ones giving that guidance.

Under the new curriculum, humanities covers a number of subjects: will EAS ensure the right amount of resources for the different subjects?

Over time we will ensure that the appropriate resources are in place, whether that is schools working on the development of the new curriculum or staff with that expertise enabling coordination to take place. 2022 will see the introduction of a curriculum for Wales; already work has been undertaken with schools to help them think about its implementation. Not everyone is in the same place, as would be expected.

Is the new curriculum not being postponed, considering Covid?

The bill has been put before the Senedd for the curriculum for Wales. Schools have been given the opportunity to start planning now. We will listen to practitioners and headteachers and adapt in light of the feedback that they give.

A third primary school will open in Monmouthshire in the next few years. Will we miss out on Welsh medium teaching staff, given that they tend to live in Cardiff?

It is a national concern. We recently launched an 'Aspiring Leaders' programme to focus on Welsh medium teaching, and other areas where there is a shortage. We are also focussing on the engagement in sabbatical schemes, which are important for promoting the Welsh language across the region. We are able to pool resources across Monmouthshire and the other four local authorities, and generate interest in those roles. Hopefully we can retain high quality practitioners in this region. The links with universities that undertake teacher training is also critical for us, not only to engage new practitioners into the region but also to keep them here – to give them high quality professional learning, make them feel valued, and then identifying those in that cohort who can be leaders of the future.

Have grades been given on assessments?

A wide process has been undertaken by the schools to determine what they believe the outcome would have been for each child. Those grades have been given to the exam boards who have undertaken their own process. The process is therefore not based on particular assessments. Every child will receive their results as normal, but the means by which those grades were calculated will have been different. We therefore won't use those grades for accountability purposes this year.

Chair's conclusion:

We touched on the issue of the effectiveness of schools over time, particularly secondary schools – this issue needs to be monitored. Moving forward, listening to the recipients of the

service is very important. We considered the implementation of the new curriculum and the pressures that it will bring. It is a very challenging time.

6. Work Planning

Councillor Brown noted that it would be useful to have an update in September from the Chief Officer about how matters are progressing, and how schools have coped, as well as local and border issues, etc. Chief Officer Mclean agreed to give an update in September. Councillor Groucott proposed scrutinising the possible rise of domestic violence and abuse, and how children are caught up in it.

Chair's conclusion:

The balance between education issues and children's social services needs to be considered: looking back, there does seem to have been a slight imbalance at times. In light of Covid-19, our priorities have changed dramatically. Our focus is going to be on children returning to school, ensuring that they have the best possible experience – this will drive the agenda.

7. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on Tuesday 17th March 2020 were confirmed and signed as an accurate record.

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

The next meeting is on September 8th at 10.00, with a pre-meeting at 09.30.

The meeting ended at **12.00 pm**