

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Children and Young People Select Committee held at County Hall, Usk - Remote Attendance on Thursday, 9th September, 2021 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

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

County Councillors: C.Edwards, D. Jones,
M.Lane, M. Powell, J.Watkins,

Also in attendance County Councillor: S.
Woodhouse and County Councillor A. Easson
substituting for County Councillor M. Groucutt

Officers in Attendance

Will McLean, Chief Officer for Children and Young People
Sharon Randall-Smith, Head of Achievement and Attainment
Nikki Wellington, Finance Manager
Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Tyrone Stokes, Accountant
Cath Saunders, Children and Young People Directorate
Tim Bird, 21st Century Schools Adviser

APOLOGIES: County Councillor M.Groucutt

1. Declarations of interest

Personal non-prejudicial interests were declared by Councillor Thomas as a Governor at Ysgol Gymraeg Y Fenni, Councillor Powell as a Governor at King Henry VIII, Councillor Jones as a Governor at Ysgol Gymraeg Y Fenni, Tony Easson as a Governor at Ysgol Y Ffin, and Maggie Harris as a Governor at Deri View.

2. Public Open Forum

Written Representation from Mary Ann Brocklesby, Governor Deri View Primary School and Abergavenny Town Councillor. In my personal capacity.

Dear Committee Members,

Below is my response to the consultation document on the proposed all through school in Abergavenny. The proposal outlines with clarity why King Henry VIII school needs to be replaced with a learning environment that is fit for purpose as a school for the 21st century. It is less clear about the benefits for Deri View (DV). In my view it also fails to set the strategic direction for the new school in a number of key areas.

1. The evidence base

The evidence base is weak. We are being asked to back one of the biggest investments in Abergavenny and its future based on a set of assumptions without the evidence to show the

new school will, on balance, produce better outcomes for children in DV's catchment area than those already achieved by a thriving school which is continually improving. This has been detailed elsewhere in the submission by DV's governing body. I will not restate the arguments here, other than to say MCC has not shown due diligence or undertaken robust assessments required under the socio-economic duty of care, protected characteristics, especially age, and the WCFG Act. Surely a major oversight for a school with 46%, and rising, of the children receiving FSM.

2. Nursery provision

Excluding nursery provision from the remit of the proposal because it will be non-maintained is extraordinary. Impacts assessments for proposed provision for this critical age group in an area of disadvantage is not only necessary, its mandatory. These assessments should be attached to the proposal they are not. The current proposal downgrades current provision, both in terms of time and access with hours cut and no guarantee of places within the new private nursery. The potential loss of provision for vulnerable and disadvantaged children, especially those just above the threshold of flying start risks greater disadvantage and vulnerability not less.

3. Involvement and collaboration of parents

There is scant evidence that parents and the wider community around DV have been contacted and involved in plans for the school and their children's education. The mood of the public meeting I attended at DV was one of hurt and concern that their views were being sought at such a late stage in the proposal's development without any sense of what the loss of DV might mean to the community. Parents are not convinced that the safety of their children, the transition to secondary education, the role DV has played in promoting community cohesion and connection has been taken into account and valued. For some parents it is yet another example of their community being excluded and forgotten.

The proposal as it now stands is neither consistent with MCC's sustainable development policy of involvement and collaboration or sufficiently robust in how it has, and will in future: a) collaborate with parents and the community in affecting change in socio-economic deprivation and b) involve the entire school in an open review prior to implementation. Both of which are promised in the appendices of the proposal. Children, Parents and the community deserve better.

3. New School in Abergavenny

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

Challenge:

Given the low level of community feedback, are the numbers standard in comparison to other consultations, on similar projects? Will further consultation be required?

In a catchment area review most people were positive but didn't express their views, so that the more vocal opposition dominated. When we postponed the exercise and did it again in the last couple of years, one of the key pieces of feedback was that people thought it was going to happen so didn't engage with it. Some of the approaches we set out in the consultation paper

have exercised some people – the maintained/non-maintained issue brought out a significant voice from a number of people. Feedback numbers are therefore broadly similar. The engagement events that we have held have been very reassuring for people. At this time, we don't think that further consultation is necessary regarding governance, though there will be a great deal concerning how the school will look, operate, etc. Tim Bird has joined the team directly from Monmouth Comprehensive School, where he was responsible for the delivery of the successful project we had there. He will bring that experience of collaboration and engagement into the team and the work that we do with the schools in the future.

If the route is to go to a non-maintained nursery provision at Year 3, the Flying Start children will have nowhere to go. Won't Year 3 become elitist for those people who can afford to pay for that education?

There is a plan to relocate some Flying Start provision and include in the new school setting, which will be beneficial, and retain the Acorn Centre on the Deri View site for Flying Start provision. So we intend to expand and develop that opportunity for parental engagement, for support for those children. We are looking to create that sense around family and children's centres; we know how important the first 1000 days are, but equally, how they link through into their schooling life.

Can we consider travel for children who continue Welsh after GCSE, if there is still not the option for them to do so within Monmouthshire?

We thought that the Welsh medium stream would be a positive development as it would give an in-county solution for Welsh medium education after primary school, but in the discussions with colleagues in the forum it has been very clear about that affecting the experience that those children have. The conversations that are planned for colleagues in Blaenau Gwent, Merthyr and south Powys have the potential to create a viable opportunity in the future. If Ysgol Y Ffeni moves to being a two-form entry school soon, Y Ffin will be a single-form entry – an expansion up to 210 –, and hopefully there will be additional capacity added in the NE of the county. But even those numbers wouldn't give us sufficient quantum to have our own secondary provision in Monmouthshire. So collaboration will be the way forward for a while, but the point about transport is something we need to be cognisant of.

Is it a good move to have an overall governing body for three strands of education?

The same could perhaps be said of a governing body for a very large secondary school. As we go through the process of drawing the transitional, temporary and new governing body into place, we will look very carefully at the skills and experiences that we need to ensure the new school – if that is the direction we take – is a success. Across the county, our governors are taking advantage of the professional learning and development opportunities offered through EAS, and are doing a very good job as advocates for the children in their schools.

There are benefits to having private nursery provision, in terms of the wraparound care, but there are also then risks attached. The risks are that it is a business that must make money; nursery providers have said that it's almost impossible to manage with just the money from Welsh Government for those nursery places – that is why most private provision incurs top up fees. Top Up fees can be incredibly difficult for families on low incomes – it sometimes means that they don't take up those places, or they take up fewer hours of those places than they are entitled to. So, there are significant concerns about how that might happen. What measures will we put in place to ensure that that doesn't happen? Private businesses can go out of business –

what measures will be put in place to ensure nursery provision stays on the site? How will we definitely get a nursery provider in on the site, considering the difficulty in doing so in a school in the south of the county?

In the process of approaching this, use of the word 'private' was unfortunate, as we were clear that it was non-maintained, for which there are different models. In Abergavenny, several nursery settings are run by committee and different governance models that aren't profit driven. A non-maintained setting can be delivered in a number of different ways. Every child is eligible for 10 hours of nursery education every week, which is free and without a top-up, and beyond that, there is the 30-hour childcare allowance, funded by Welsh Government. So, we feel there are additional opportunities, and additional funding for us to draw on, to support extra hours, to get to a position whereby a child could have 30 hours in that setting. We were trying to find the balance of enabling people to access nursery education but also enable people to go back to work if they wanted to, for example. It is a direction of travel that Welsh Government has indicated it wants to see. The provision of nursery education in Monmouthshire is a mixed economy; in fact, there are more non-maintained providers than maintained, although the number attending is roughly 50/50. There are other advantages, such as being able to offer 48 weeks of the year through the 30-hour childcare offer, as opposed to only term time in a maintained setting. Therefore, while there are understandable concerns regarding accessibility, there are benefits associated with it as well.

Will there be a primary and secondary SRB? Is it an acknowledgement that ALN needs are increasing across the county? If it is to be a fully established SRB will there be a knock-on effect on Caldicot or the whole county, in terms of reducing capacities elsewhere?

We are seeing a growth in the number of children requiring support for additional learning needs across the county. Our biggest area of demand is children with neurodevelopmental needs, at 36% of those stated. We want to provide specialist provision for those children. Existing provision in Caldicot, Monmouth, Deri View, etc. provide for a range of different needs, but seeing the evidence and work being done for what future demand might be, complex neurodevelopmental needs was absolutely the area for us to focus on. If the consultation process works its way through, there will be one SRB because there will be one school. The through school model is one that we see very often in independent specialist provisions. In terms of the design process, we will work with the leaders of our current settings to understand what works best.

The consultation document didn't go into the pros and cons of maintained or non-maintained provision. Presumably, in relation to the 60 places mentioned, that is 30 in the morning and 30 in the afternoon, so there wouldn't be any overlap for anyone to obtain the full 30 hours free childcare to which they might be entitled? Has this matter been explored enough?

The matter featured heavily in the discussions at all the meetings. There were different levels of concern. There was an immediate concern that there would be a private provider, while a second element concerned the nature of 'control' of the setting and provision, and a sense that the children would be better served if they were under the 'control' of the school from age 3 all the way through. But there are examples of non-maintained settings on school sites that work very well, with a good level of integration. The third level concerned accessibility and equity of opportunity. It's a good prompt for us to consider what a future engagement might look like. In the Cabinet paper we were mindful of expanding the views and having a distinct element that

considered the pros and cons of the maintained/non-maintained issue. We will reflect on what we are able to do within the confines of the code as we progress.

I am very concerned about having a non-maintained nursery on the site. Deri View is currently 47% FSM and rising – the highest in Monmouthshire. We have 40 funded and 20 non-funded ALN, so 25% are in that group. We also have 13% who have English as a second language. So, we have a very specific situation. A private provider means a lack of control, as it is not under the constraints of the headteacher, senior leadership team, or the governors. To have to transition from Year 2 into a non-maintained Year 3 and then back into Reception seems illogical. These parents will not be able to afford the care. The thought that we might lose all the hard work that the school has put in to ensure that these children have access to the best care and transitions is alarming. No mention has been made that the parents at Deri View, supported by town councillors, have presented a petition requesting the continuation of maintained provision.

Regarding the petition that was submitted at the last full council meeting, the balance might be to ask someone if, rather than the 2.5 hours per day of free childcare that their child currently receives, they would prefer 6 hours a day, including nursery education, in a regulated setting that's inspected by Estyn, with staff qualified in child development, that develops and delivers the curriculum for Wales? What might the answer be? We know that Welsh Government wants to see greater flexibility in our nursery provision. There are clearly differing views on this, and we need to take the time now to consider the benefits on both sides. Hopefully, the points just noted will give members confidence in the non-maintained settings. We also need to be careful when discussing this matter that the 50% of parents in the county whose children already receive non-maintained provision aren't given the wrong impression about the curriculum, care, inspections, etc.

King Henry pupils and staff deserve better surroundings than they currently have. Ysgol Gymraeg Y Fenni is bursting at the seams: a new building seems to be required every year to accommodate new pupils, which means less play area. The timescale given this morning is 3 years. Is there any way in which the situation at Ysgol Gymraeg Y Fenni can be alleviated, and this development pushed ahead in order to happen quicker?

We are aware of the pressures in Ysgol Y Fenni. There are currently 252 children there, and the capacity is now 317, excluding nursery provision. So, there is headroom, currently. We are pleased to see the growth in Welsh medium education in the north of the county. We don't think there is any way to accelerate the process – the key driver is to hit the project's deadlines. The construction deadline is challenging, as is ensuring that the schools transition in the appropriate way.

Ysgol Gymraeg Y Fenni has problems with capacity, whereas Ysgol Gymraeg Y Ffin needs more children. Could we look at the respective catchment areas in tandem?

The work being done in Y Ffin is tremendous. Expanding up to 210 will give the opportunity for wraparound childcare, and we want to see it thriving as a full school. If we can do something regarding catchments, then we will do so. We hope to look at the northeast of the county as well, in terms of additional Welsh medium provision, so we will need to look at the catchment areas for all our Welsh medium schools.

Chair's Summary:

The committee is generally in favour of the development. The King Henry building has been in a poor state for some time and is not fit for purpose. The school is a significant provider, serving a large area. It is important that people who live in Monmouthshire should be able to send their children through the whole school journey within the county, if possible. There are concerns about Deri View moving, which we all appreciate. It is one of the more challenging areas in the town, and the authority, in terms of deprivation levels, FSM provision, etc. A huge amount of care therefore needs to be taken in the transfer of that school – a physical move can be traumatic for pupils and even staff, as well as parents.

The major sticking point is the opposition to the non-maintained setting at age 3, especially as it is in an area of high deprivation – childcare in well-resourced families is costly but affordable, but in a low-income family it is more of an issue. I would personally not recommend going back out to consultation, as this will delay the process further. Now that we are moving towards deciding, as an authority, any hold up will not be of benefit; indeed, some members are eager for this process to move forward, given that other places in the county are also waiting for a new school. If the nursery provision can be looked at then there is no opposition from this committee – feedback has otherwise been positive.

4. Budget Monitoring

Tyrone Stokes and Nicola Wellington presented the report and answered the members' questions.

Challenge:

Two Welsh medium schools are running to deficit: can you expand on that, and how do we get them out of it?

We are finding that with small schools such as Ysgol Y Ffin that the funding attracted through the formula doesn't always generate enough to support the school's fixed costs. Under the regulations, we must give out 70% on pupil numbers, so if the numbers are less then any surplus made can't be offset against the premises' costs and resources, as would happen in a larger school. This is something that we grapple with every year, and we provide support in those circumstances.

Ysgol Y Fenni is forecasting a deficit. We are working very closely with that school, looking at staff structures, in particular. It is a growing school, with pupils coming in, but we think a review of the staffing will help with the deficit position.

Thank you to officers for everything they do to try to balance the budget. It is unfortunate that Children's Services always exceeds its budget.

It is not solely a Monmouthshire issue, or Wales, but is a UK issue. There are councils such as Wakefield that can't get provision for high-cost placements. Once a local authority goes to high-cost providers, they know that they are the last resort. We try to reduce and negotiate those costs but our powers are less strong than the provider. We actively look through our Multi Agency Service Strategy team to try to bolster that support in-house so that it is only a temporary measure. Then we try to move the children back into county, but that's not just on the grounds of finances – it has to be right for the child. The legal challenge concerning kinship

carers has led us to realign the rates that we pay them to be equal to what we pay foster carers. This couldn't have been foreseen, and made up a quarter of our overspend.

Chepstow secondary school is in deficit, but not the others. Can you expand on that?

Chepstow has faced several challenges concerning a staffing structure that they have tried to put through. Unfortunately, the restructure was delayed by the pandemic, but it has now been implemented, as of this month. The savings will take a while to come through, and they faced a year of those higher costs because at the point in time when they wanted to make the change the pandemic started. Their recovery plan reflects that delay in the timescales.

Regarding the ALN budget, what income comes in to balance the books now that Mounton House is no longer in operation?

Yes, Mounton House received an income from students placed there from other authorities. The income we now receive is for pupils placed from other authorities into our mainstream schools.

Chair's Summary:

As far as schools go, we've never been in such a positive situation: not long ago, there was a much greater number of schools in deficit. Perhaps the only positive of Covid has been the help from Welsh Government to assist schools getting into a better position. Children's' Services is almost impossible to budget and the committee wishes to give its thanks to the officers for their continuing hard work.

5. Children and Young People Select Forward Work Plan

In January 2022, the committee would like an update on Chepstow Comprehensive.

6. Council and Cabinet Forward Plan

7. To confirm minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes were confirmed and signed as an accurate record, proposed by Councillor Powell and seconded by Councillor Brown. Councillor Edwards wished to clarify that he did attend the previous meeting.

8. Date and Time of the next meeting: 14th October 2021

The meeting ended at **11.57 am**