

# Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Children and Young People Select Committee held at County Hall, Usk - Remote Attendance on Thursday, 14th October, 2021 at 10.00 am

## Councillors Present

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

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

## 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:** Maggie Harris

### 1. Declarations of Interest

Tudor Thomas and David Hughes-Jones declared a non-prejudicial interest as governors at Ysgol Gymraeg Y Fenni, and Maureen Powell declared a non-prejudicial interest as a governor at King Henry VIII.

### 2. Public Open Forum.

No public submissions were received.

### 3. Return to School Update

Will McLean gave a verbal update and answered the members' questions.

#### **Challenge:**

*The SLT at King Henry VIII has received unpleasant and threatening messages from anti-vaxxers – is there any reassurance that these people can be identified, and any action taken?*

All of our secondary schools will have received messages of this kind – perhaps even the same messages, copied and pasted. We've worked very well with our colleagues in Aneurin Bevan and are grateful for their work. Mererid Bowley, one of the public health consultants, has met with the secondary headteachers to talk through the process. It is positive that the vaccinations have been taken on at the mass vaccination centres, rather than at a school level. We work with colleagues in the legal department regarding correspondence received; there have been other instances in Monmouthshire where we have escalated that to other agencies. Headteachers should never have to receive this type of correspondence, and we are supporting them in their responses.

*Teachers who can't be involved because of Covid therefore can't be involved in development of the new curriculum. Does this pose a threat to its effective introduction?*

The curriculum challenge is significant. We are only two and a half terms away from its implementation. If there is a significant burden on leaders to be engaged with the management of operational matters,

including Covid, then it will indeed take away from some of their capacity to engage fully with curriculum development. However, they have had an extended period of time for preparation. But, yes, the ability to engage at the moment is a significant concern. We will discuss curriculum implementation with our Estyn colleagues in our meeting tomorrow.

*Regarding King Henry attendance, the leadership is concerned that the most vulnerable children are now not attending in notable numbers. Can we return to the older model of someone knocking on doors?*

Richard Austin has done a huge amount of work, nationally and locally, in how we support our schools regarding understanding the Welsh Government's position. Their position remains that they don't want to bring back some of the more pecuniary interventions relating to attendance. We are using EWOs to ensure that we are engaging with those young people to get them back into school especially as they are often the most vulnerable learners. In Monmouthshire, our attendance is normally in the mid-90%; the figure at King Henry indeed represents a significant drop-off, doubtless due in large part to Covid. But we do need to ensure that those children return to school. There are some children with significant anxiety caused by the pandemic, so different approaches need to be considered for different circumstances.

*Would it be more sensible for Welsh Government to postpone the new curriculum, to give more time to organise after Covid and give the teachers the chance to take it on board properly?*

When the new minister for Education, Jeremy Miles, was elected he undertook a review of this: the change he made was that secondary schools could choose to delay until 2023, and then implement for Year 7 and 8 at that time. Now, I don't think a delay will be considered. The challenge for us, as a local authority, is that we will see significant variation in delivery across our schools. that, allied to significant changes to the accountability framework, will mean that how we give account for our schools' activities will be a significant challenge in the future, but we are working on that with colleagues across the county.

#### **Chair's Summary:**

The level of Covid infection remains worrying. Absences in Year 10 and 11 will have an effect on exam candidates; greater flexibility from exam boards will be reined in next year. The level of attendance is a concern generally, particularly in the case of more vulnerable learners, for whom school can be the most structured part of their lives. Pressure on leaders is worrying, too, especially with the pressure of the incoming curriculum. We thank all leaders and staff in schools for their continued efforts.

Councillor Edwards wished to note his admiration for how Chepstow comprehensive has improved and dealt with the challenges of Covid. Councillor Groucott expressed the same sentiments towards King Henry VIII.

#### **4. Welsh Education Strategic Plan**

Sharon Randall-Smith presented the report and answered the members' questions.

#### **Challenge:**

*Could we have more detail about how late immersion provision works?*

The late immersion provision that we've identified in the WESP has started as a pilot – the local authority has funded this so that we can develop the right model for us. Welsh immersion looks

different in each authority depending on their starting point, rurality, proximity, etc. We have done research into different models with Ysgol Y Ffin: they have visited other schools that offer Welsh immersion provision, had contact with colleagues across Wales, worked with Welsh Government, and have started to develop our own model. Currently, we have two pupils receiving intense Welsh language support for a portion of the day, and then spending time in their own classes so that they have full access to the curriculum. This is in Ysgol Y Ffin because that is in the area where we know we need to grow the opportunities for Welsh medium education as soon as possible. But we need to look at this more broadly across the authority, considering our aspiration to have 120 per cohort – we will need to look at this development when we look at the third school in the Monmouth area. The current immersion provision will look at how we can scale up over time. Welsh Government just announced that we are able to apply as a local authority for a Latecomers To Welsh immersion grant, of up to £100k – we will submit our application form before the deadline of the end of March, and we will know how we are going to use it to accelerate the things we have already put in place, particularly training to our Welsh medium schools in the delivery of immersion techniques.

*What is our provision and strategy for tackling speech and language therapy through the medium of Welsh?*

This is a challenge across the region, generally. We have one Welsh-speaking member of our SpLD team, which is hugely beneficial to us and our Welsh-medium learners. We will have to work with Aneurin Bevan Health Board to secure more Welsh speakers in the services that support our youngsters with speech and language and communication. Jacquelyn Elias and her team are working closely with regional colleagues to move that forward as quickly as possible. It is very difficult to find someone who is qualified to deliver the provision and also speaks Welsh, hence the ambition to do that within the lifetime of the WESP. However, no-one is underestimating that challenge.

*Regarding pupils moving from primary to secondary over the past few years many pupils have been withdrawn from Welsh medium education because of circumstances at Ysgol Gyfun Gwynllyw. How are these pupils catered for? What is the county council doing to help this significant number of pupils, and avoid the drain of pupils from Welsh medium education in the future?*

It is parental choice, however, there is a concern that the numbers transferring are lower than they have been, historically. We are part of a newly formed partnership board with Torfaen in order for us to look at the issues and challenges that are arising in our pupils transferring, and look at the quality of education, and ensuring that we can increase the transfer to Ysgol Gyfun Gwynllyw. Ysgol Is Coed in Newport has set up their immersion provision to enable and encourage more students to move across from primary to secondary. Over the period of time, we hope to increase the transfer rate. Within the WESP there is also a note that we are in discussions with other local authorities to be able to look at another secondary provision that might enable some of our learners to travel in less time to a secondary provision. Pupils from Monmouth can currently manage the journey to Abergavenny for the primary period, but it is difficult to add the journey time to Ysgol Gyfun Gwynllyw on top – there are discussions around that within the Band C 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools programme.

*Regarding Outcome 1 and more 3-year-olds receiving education through the Welsh medium nursery provision, given that a number of nurseries are private, how would you envisage this happening? Has any consideration been given to dual language nursery provision?*

Outcome 1 looks at increasing the number of children who are in early education provision. We work very closely with Mudiad Meithrin, an organisation that helps us to set up Welsh medium childcare facilities. There are three in the county linked closely to the schools; within the lifetime of the WESP we aim to increase this to five. This will provide up to 63 places, just over half of what we would be looking for by the end of the ten-year period. They will help us to find and recruit Welsh medium practitioners to work in those settings. It is a challenge and links to Outcome 7 regarding the workforce. Our children will then have the option of transferring into Welsh medium nurseries – there’s already one at Ysgol Y Fenni, there will be one at Ysgol Y Ffin, and we will look to the new school at Monmouth. Our practitioners already have access to significant training opportunities to develop Welsh language in our English medium schools, which is also available to Welsh language practitioners. We are trying to build up Welsh language skills across our whole cohort of learners.

*How are people with different language skills affected? i.e., immersion from a household where English is spoken all the time versus one where Welsh is spoken all the time?*

The majority of our learners who are accessing Welsh medium education are from English medium homes. We have found that at some point parents are reluctant to engage in a Welsh medium education for their children if they don’t speak Welsh themselves. We are therefore trying to develop, through our immersion, how we can support parents too. We can look at successful approaches taken by other local authorities. During the pandemic, our Welsh medium schools have been very proactive in providing a lot of additional support to parents to support their children’s learning. We can also look a little further to how we offer supportive sessions to parents themselves.

*The plan mentions the disproportionate numbers choosing out of county provision – has any study been done as to why Wyedean is chosen?*

We don’t always know the reasons when students and parents make their choice when transferring at Year 7. Sometimes it is because their sibling is already at a school, families have relocated into Monmouthshire and have an existing link with the school, and there might be a choice based on the curriculum offer, which is very different in Wales. Sometimes the decision is based on how the parents feel about the child as a learner. It is a similar pattern in other authorities who are in a similar position. Wyedean’s close proximity to Chepstow is a factor. There’s always provision for English and Welsh speaking families, so the choice is there for both. Parents who want a Welsh language provision don’t have the same amount of choice as those seeking an English language provision. The WESP is to increase the opportunities for parents to engage in that and to promote the many benefits of bilingualism.

*A survey for Chepstow/Wyedean would be useful.*

It would be reasonable for us to look at the reasons for transfer choices, but we can’t always guarantee that what we get back is an accurate or full response. Going forward, results won’t be published so that won’t be used as an accountability measure when it comes to choices.

*It is disappointing that the new school in Monmouth is not going to come on board now until September 2023, particularly as it is a long journey for pupils in that area to travel Ysgol Y Ffin and Ysgol Gymraeg Y Ffeni.*

The local authority has spent a significant amount of time trying to find a suitable solution for Monmouth, with areas inside and outside the town having been considered. Recently, we have confirmed that all of the potential land of a suitable size isn’t available to us or is in floodplain areas. We

therefore must now look within our existing provision to see where we can house a seedling school, which will involve formal consultation, and a particular period of time. But if the process can somehow move faster than we expect then we will do so.

**Chair's Summary:**

Thank you for the comprehensive report and the update, particularly relating to late immersion techniques. We have considered other important areas such as ALN and the transfer from primary to secondary and issues with Gwynllyw, which we need to keep an eye on. We need to press secondary provision with a tripartite arrangement between Powys, Blaenau Gwent and Monmouthshire, which is very important in terms of travel time. We also considered the matter of early years provision. The challenge regarding the workforce is considerable, and very important, as is the support for parents.

**5. Children and Young People Select Committee Forward Work Programme**

FSM strategy is unlikely to be ready by the next meeting, and ALN should come before it, so needs to be added. Members requested that a discussion of Chepstow school be added to the next meeting. Councillor Brown requested an update on the progress of the new school building there, and Councillor Edwards proposed discussing what could be put in place while waiting for everything to progress with the 21<sup>st</sup> Century schools programme. The Chair cautioned that perhaps a great deal can't be said at this stage regarding Chepstow.

**6. Cabinet and Council Work Plan**

**7. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting**

The minutes were confirmed and signed as an accurate record, proposed by Councillor Groucott, and seconded by Councillor Powell.

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

Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup> December 10:00am.

The meeting ended at **11.26 am**