

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Children and Young People Select Committee held at County Hall, Usk - Remote Attendance on Thursday, 3rd March, 2022 at 10.00 am

Councillors in attendance

County Councillor L. Brown (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: L.Brown, 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

Nikki Wellington, Finance Manager

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager

Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer

Tyrone Stokes, Accountant

Apologies: County Councillor T.Thomas

1. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

2. Public Open Forum.

No public submissions were received.

3. Family Support Services

Charlotte Drury delivered the presentation and answered the members' questions with additional comments from Tyrone Stokes.

Challenge:

What involvement was there with debt referral, so that families are managing their budgets?

This is one of the real values of the helpline that we set up – the worker is trained to give basic welfare rights advice. Welsh Government did this work in 2020/21, in which they offered training opportunities to help upskill people who might be in a position to offer advice. We also have very good links between the Early Help panel and the Housing Intervention panel; the latter has lots of opportunities for people to seek advice concerning welfare rights, benefits advice, income maximisation, debt management and debt advice. We have a worker sitting on both of those panels to ensure that we are joining up in the right way and that people are getting the right support.

There is a concern about children who haven't connected with working online, who are still at home now. Are there ways of encouraging them to come to school?

Because education is so important, all of the different services are picking up supporting children back into education and supporting their access to learning. There is an underpinning theme of social pedagogy across the landscape. Almost all of the children whom ACT works with improve their educational attendance. In terms of specific things, a big piece of work is

taking place between the educational psychologists and school risk counselling to look at emotion-based school avoidance – in fact, most school avoidance is rooted in emotional wellbeing i.e. children not being happy in school. I also sit on the management committee of Monmouthshire's Pupil Referral Service, which helps me to make useful connections. Improving children's learning and learning outcomes has to be at the heart of everything we do, but it is not a quick fix. In Monmouthshire, the difference between children from more and less affluent communities is more visible than in other authorities, and we know that this affects their emotional wellbeing.

Have the referrals been particularly because families are confined to one house?

To the degree to which that was a factor, we are largely through that now, as children are back in school, and adults are back at work. Space is always an issue: having access to the outside, green space, etc. is always important to people's wellbeing so the answer is both yes and no.

It is excellent to see that we are doing a lot of work on intervention.

We can never do enough. The direction of travel, in the sense of taking a preventative approach, is now unrecognisable compared with 7 or 8 years ago. The local authority taking children into care should always be the last resort. If we can do more 'downstream' work to ensure that, then that is the direction in which we will continue. And we also need to ensure that we are making best use of our resources: if we are to even scratch the surface of demand, we need to reach into our communities to grow the resource and resilience there. Our next focus will be on how we do that.

Regarding the neurodevelopmental panel, parents feel that if they don't get through that panel and passed on to an eye scan referral, they feel dropped. What can we do to support those who don't get a referral to get their children diagnosed?

If parents aren't accepted there, then they automatically come to the Early Help panel. So, they aren't dropped, but it might feel that way as they aren't getting the answer that they want. The EH panel tries to look at the child's needs, the family's needs and what is available, which might include support to go back into the eye scan process.

Concerning poverty: after 2 years of Covid, and now with a cost-of-living crisis, does the service have the flexibility to respond to future, unexpected, changes?

Monmouthshire has always been good at pivoting quickly. When we went into Covid, our school-based counselling service was already exploring a digital platform, so that happened almost immediately. We set up an advice line that went live before the end of March 2020. We offered virtual engagement, which works really well for some children, so we are keeping that and other developments that add value as part of a blended approach. We are also worried about what the future will bring for our more vulnerable families; the best that we can do is to have the right lines of communication and advocate for the families with whom we work as best we can. I have met with the MCC team that deals with poverty; it is a matter of joining up services and the community-based work that is taking place, so that each aspect can add value to the other.

How does the service work with other areas of the service provided by MCC, under CYP?

There is a range of place where liaison between the services occurs. The Early Help panel is a key one. Someone gets a seat at the panel if they can take a referral away and do something useful with it. We also work very closely with the school-based multi-agency meetings, and there is a link between those and the EH panel, which is very valuable, as the schools will look

at the needs of individual pupils and we then link in to the EH panel where a range of services are available. Another ongoing piece of work, which sits in CYP, is the early years Transformation Pioneer work. This involves setting up community-based hubs that will enable every child aged 0-7 to have a professional who is interested in them. It is a multi-disciplinary approach that concerns supporting family resilience, child welfare and child development at a very early stage. We are excited about the opportunities that it will bring.

Are you working as hard with specialist school governors as with professionals, or is there more that you could do?

We can always do more. I am more than happy to have a conversation about this to explore ideas. As mentioned earlier, my next focus will be on how to work more closely with community-based activity and how to develop the resource in that way. Partnership working isn't about having everyone around the same table but having the right people around the right tables, and having the right lines of communication between those tables. I am always open to hearing of something we missed or of another connection that we could make.

Children didn't get the same pastoral support during Covid. How are schools making up for that gap?

Pastoral care is a central pillar for all of our schools in Monmouthshire, but I can't speak about this specifically. I know from the multi-agency meetings that take place in most of the secondary schools that pastoral care of pupils is paramount. The Early Help panel in particular covers all of the different services (e.g. shift, Primary Care Mental Health, etc.) that promote emotional wellbeing.

Concerning the gap in listening and support for pupils, is there capacity to increase the volunteer base?

We have quite a few volunteers across our system. We offer student placements and are working with colleges. We have counselling, social work and youth work students volunteering with us, as well as some parent volunteers. Some parents who had received the service are now working in it, in paid employment. We have a good track record across early help services to bring people in and expand, but there is more potential there – in order to scratch the surface of demand we need to look at how we grow capacity using volunteers and placements. Proper training and support are important: once brought in, they need to be in a structure in which they can be provided with support and key contacts.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you for this report and the excellent work done by the team, particularly setting up the Early Help panel – the early help approach is the best one. Councillor Watkins also wished to commend the Achieve Change Together team, whose outcomes have been excellent.

4. Budget Monitoring

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

Challenge:

Are most of the grants Covid-based or for particular aspects? What are the time limits on them being spent?

There are grants for specific items not related to Covid. For example, the Additional Learning Needs grant of £184k, which is there for the new additional learning needs act, which is coming in, and the Revenue Maintenance grant, £1.1m, which we have had for a number of years. That grant will be spent this year; in fact, it has been spent, to offset existing school expenditures. We have agreed with Welsh Government that a number of the other grants can be rolled into the next financial year, which will allow schools to plan and make proper provision for them.

Although the report shows a favourable financial position, one-off grants have masked the real pressures moving forward. So, there is still a £1.3m pressure for the children's element in social care. The new numbers that come in are those who require high-cost support. The grants are very welcome, but we still go into next year with a challenge.

In terms of pressures on social care, is that due to children who are in care – the numbers or the complexity of their needs increasing?

Not necessarily. The main pressure is the looked-after population that we serve. But we are also trying to get finances where we have exhausted all of the opportunities to make use of the scarce resources that we have – we are trying to bolster and have preventative support downstream, as mentioned in the previous item, as the last resort is to bring someone into care. It's a case of trying to supplement the preventative approach that we have.

When going for innovative approaches, you are looking for the appropriate grants to supplement that work?

Yes, and there's a question of legacy, as when the grants are retracted we can't 'turn off the tap' – we are left trying to carry on that work, otherwise it is lost.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you for the report. It is good to see that the school balances are improving. Thank you to the staff for their hard work in a very difficult area.

5. Children and Young People Select Committee Forward Work Programme

Given political considerations during the pre-election period, ALN should be considered by the next administration – therefore, the next meeting will cover the Myst Project only. Following the next meeting, the new committee (post-election) will decide the work programme.

6. To confirm the minutes of the previous meetings:

- 20th January 2022
- 31st January 2022 (Special)

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

7. To confirm the date and time of the next meeting as 7th April 2022 at 10.00am

The meeting ended at **11.15 am**