

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Children and Young People Select Committee held at Remote Meeting on Tuesday, 8th September, 2020 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor T.Thomas (Chairman)
County Councillors: L.Brown, M.Groucutt, M.Lane, M. Powell and J.Watkins

Officers in Attendance

Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Will McLean, Chief Officer for Children and Young People
Sharon Randall-Smith, Head of Achievement and Attainment
Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager

APOLOGIES: Councillors L.Jones and D. Jones, Maggie Harris representing the Monmouthshire Association of School Governors

1. Declarations of Interest

Maureen Powell expressed an interest as a governor of King Henry VIII Comprehensive School.

2. Public Open Forum

No members of the public were present.

3. School Examination Performance Summer 2020: Verbal Update by Will McLean, Chief Officer, Children and Young People Directorate

The two stages of education to discuss are Key Stage 5 (pupils leaving school at age 18, having typically completed A Levels and BTEC qualifications) and Key Stage 4 (the end of statutory education.) The first thing to cover is the decisions taken across the EAS region (EAS are our partners in school improvement, working closely with our schools and as part of the national picture.) The way that we use performance data has changed significantly: the days of publishing on the day how each school has fared, the pass rates, etc. have largely left us. This is for good reason, as they led to behaviours that weren't positive, with schools taking decisions about how they entered children for certain qualifications, and the way that they taught children. Now, exam results are a key part of how we work with schools, but are used in a more nuanced and sensitive way.

Throughout May and June, Quals Wales (the independent regulator in Wales) undertook a consultation with stakeholders about how it would standardise exam results in Wales this summer. Concerns were raised about that the process, but we worked through it with Quals Wales, and Welsh Government were obviously involved too. The now-famous algorithms were determined as the process by which the grades could be determined. As we got closer to A Level day in particular, there was intensified speculation about how the algorithm would work, and the impact it might have on students. In Wales, there were several discussions and decisions made in a number of days, that affected the way children receive their exam results. The first, for Key Stage 5, was the Minister's announcement on 12th August that any student would be able to access their AS Level grade if it was better than the algorithm-determined A2 Level grade (at the end of the first year, children sit their AS Level, which makes up 40% of their A Level, and in the second year they sit their A2, which makes up the remainder.) On 13th

August, the exam results were published. The schools supported their children, as always, and worked hard to make sense of the announcement the day before, and understand what its impact would be on children's ability to access their next step. For the majority of students, that next step entailed studying in further education.

However, as you will know, there was a huge outcry across the UK about the impact of the algorithm, its unfairness, and how children in larger schools or colleges in disadvantaged areas seemed to be penalised to a greater extent than those elsewhere. Not all of that is relevant to Wales: here, the argument put forward by the government, examination board and Quals Wales was always that for A2 we had a much better indicator of existing attainment because we already had the AS grade. Following discussions across the UK, Welsh Government took the decision to move to a position whereby centre-assessed grades (CAGs), which were those submitted by schools to the examination bodies representing what they believed a student would reasonably achieve in the summer, could be used as well as the previous year's AS grade, and as well as the algorithm grade.

We know that this did affect some of our students, including making access to their desired HE course more challenging than we would have hoped. We are working to resolve issues such as these. Key Stage 5 is ordinarily the more straightforward of the exam results, but this year it was more problematic due to the confusion around the grades, and because universities had already responded to the students after the initial publication of results, and then had to look at how to manage their offers after the change in approach. We were in very close contact with our 4 secondary heads to understand what they were doing to ensure their learners could access their desired HE courses. At a subsequent meeting of this committee, we will be able to provide destination data from our schools – I think that will be more telling for this year, rather than thinking about the number of children that achieved certain thresholds.

Regarding Key Stage 4: The Minister's announcement in the week of 17th August marked out that GCSE students would be awarded the highest of either their centre-assessed grade or the grade determined by the algorithm. The former will determine most significantly the grades for this year's cohort. We've been very clear with our schools that due to the vagaries of the system and processes this year, we won't be able to use GCSE outcomes for accountability purposes as we have previously. As mentioned earlier, we are trying to move away from a published and public approach, to a more nuanced one. But the changes that have taken place in the summer are so significant that it is very difficult for us to do anything on a school basis. We will be working closely with our schools in the coming weeks to understand what happened in the summer, beyond the headline data, and to ensure that their preparations are in place for next year.

To give a sense of the scale of the change in grades: in 2019, 7% of students accessed an A* grade, in 2020 it was 12.1%. For students accessing A*-A grades, it was 18.4% in 2019 and 25.9% in 2020. A*-C (C being the old 'Pass' line) moved from 62.8% in 2019 to 74.5% in 2020. The full pass rate, A*-G, had a much smaller increase, from 97.2% in 2019 to 99.6% in 2020. As the shift is significant, we have to be very careful about how we and the schools use the data. I'm really pleased that the process we went through with the schools during the year gave a good indication of where they were tracking; they have largely been in line with their indicated trajectories. We have been clear as directors throughout Gwent and the EAS region that we want to find a common approach to sharing the data and analyses that we have.

When we bring that information back to this committee we'll look to understand some of the dynamics around the Cap-9, which is the principal measure at the end of Key Stage 4, made up of 9 qualification slots. 3 of these are determined (literacy measure [the best of either English or Welsh literature or language], the numeracy measure [the best of maths or numeracy], and the science measure [the best grade from a science GCSE]), and the 6 remaining slots can be filled with the best outcomes that the learner achieves. Rather than comparing this year's cohort to previous ones, we will consider potential differences within this year's cohort: boys and girls, FSM and non-FSM learners, etc. There are other areas of interest which we will consider, such as subject performance.

As with Key Stage 5, destinations are really important when it comes to Key Stage 4, as many students will decide what they will study at A Level, and/or which institution they will attend (staying put, attending a college, commencing an apprenticeship, etc.) Ensuring that this year the students were well counselled became critical for our schools, which have worked carefully with their students to discuss with and advise them about their best options and opportunities. We are seeing increased numbers of children staying on at our sixth forms, which is very positive, as we want a thriving post-16 environment in Monmouthshire.

Challenge:

Did any students miss out on HE places, due to the three different types of grades?

At the moment, we don't have figures for how many pupils in Monmouthshire missed out on their first choice. We will try to ascertain that during the Destination analysis. Ordinarily, there are some pupils who don't receive the grades they were hoping for, in order to go to their first choice university. The UCAS process allows them to choose a second choice, for this eventuality. This year some children accessed clearing, the process by which all of the university places that haven't been filled as first or second choice offers are made available to the general student population. Students can enter clearing places if their grades were better or worse than expected. We know a certain number of students accessed clearing, which might suggest they missed out on their first choice.

When applying for a university place, do the students have to state which assessment (AS, CAG, Algorithm) was used to calculate their grades?

I don't believe there was any requirement for the students to disclose the means by which their grades were determined. The examination boards worked through the process and determined themselves what grade should be allocated to each pupil. There were three variables to consider, and the highest grade was taken from among these.

How will we prepare for next year's results, given the potential for localised lockdowns etc.?

We met as the 22 directors for education last Friday with Welsh Government officials, and this was one of the first questions asked. The important announcement recently has been the independent review into what happened this summer – this will be undertaken by the director of the Open University in Wales. I believe there will be an interim report to the minister in October, with a final report by December. The message from Welsh Government is that there won't be a rushed decision concerning next year's examinations. Possible ideas have been mentioned in the press, such as moving the exam dates back, giving pupils the time to make up for that which was lost this year – my understanding is that this isn't as easy as it might sound. Other suggestions include using centre-assessed grades again but with an increased level of moderation, from either examining bodies or school-based moderation, perhaps involving moderation between schools (which didn't happen this year).

As the grades have been higher overall, have the courses raised their requirements?

If it was thought that at the outset the algorithm had benefitted some groups more than others, the risk would be that they could gain access to places but the way that the CAGs were used, the whole system had that inflationary pressure, and therefore everyone would have benefitted from it – if, indeed, that pressure existed. So it will be interesting to see what the plans are, and how HE as a sector responds to its plans for next year. The submissions for UCAS are this autumn term, so students will be thinking now about where they are going to apply (pupils have already applied for veterinary and medicine places). The offers from universities will have already been made; pupils therefore already know whether they have been accepted by their institution before they receive their examination results. The universities also receive the results

before the schools. Therefore there won't have been the opportunity to change the offers to children this year but next year they might think about who they offer to and how many places they offer (for popular courses they typically 'over offer', knowing that in an ordinary year not every child will achieve their expected results). Therefore, we will have to wait and see what happens over the course of the year.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to Mr Mclean for updating the committee on what is a very complicated situation, at both Key Stage 4 and 5. Of course, there's been so much media interest across the summer, it's been incredibly difficult. The committee wishes to thank teachers as well for their input and time, particularly GCSE and Sixth Form teachers' time spent over the results period. The main concern is fairness, especially going forward for next year's cohort because their teaching has been disrupted, with a significant chunk of teaching lost – and we don't know what's going to happen in the coming months leading to the next set of exams. We will undoubtedly return to this topic.

4. Return to School: Verbal Update by Will McLean

At the end of last term I briefed this committee about the return to school: at that point, there was a return to school for three weeks at the end of the summer for 'staying in touch' contact sessions, with no more than 30% of pupils in school at any one time. This three-week period was very successful. We had one of the highest participation rates in Wales, with the pupils and staff reportedly very happy to be back. Over the summer, the headteachers and leadership teams, colleagues in catering and transport, etc., have put a huge amount of work in to make sure that we could fulfil the guidance provided by Welsh Government for the return to school this autumn. As CYP staff, we met with headteachers every Friday during the last 3 weeks of the holiday to work through questions and queries. We also met with trade union reps and teaching bodies each Friday to ensure that they are comfortable with how things are progressing.

We have also seen significant changes to the guidance: we are now on version 3. It sets out quite clearly that schools have 2 weeks to build up to full school occupation. We had discussed this locally, deciding that it was appropriate for schools to have 2 days without any pupils on site, in order to prepare their facilities and processes adequately. These two days of preparation were subsequently adopted nationally, and would be additional to the 6 inset days for staff development due to be taken throughout the year. The return to full occupation will be achieved by all schools by Monday 14th.

The vast majority of primary schools will have reached full occupation before 14th, with many doing so in the coming days. 3 out of the 4 secondary schools are working through a rolling admission programme: most started last week with years 7 and 12 (transition years), moving perhaps to years 13 and 10 after that, and so on. One school is taking a different approach, having years 7 and 12 in last week, followed by 11 and 13 this week, so that they can work with them as key exam groups to catch up where needed, with the rest of the school receiving a blended learning offer i.e. working from home until 14th.

We have worked very carefully with HR colleagues to ensure that members of staff who had been shielded can return to school safely. The guidance is clear about measures which should be taken, all being premised on prevention as the most important aspect: as expected, anyone who is symptomatic, or who has a symptomatic household member, shouldn't be in school; measures such as hand cleaning, increased cleaning in communal areas, "catch it, bin it, kill it", etc., are also stressed. Minimising contact between individuals and maintaining social distancing are also key considerations. Welsh Government made it clear that social distancing did not have to exist between children, but it did between contact groups. Typically, in a primary school a contact group would be a class. Staggered starts to the school day were introduced, and there would be no communal time in school halls. Lunch is provided in the classroom, and those

lunch breaks are staggered. There are distinct play areas per group. Such contact group management is easier at primary level than at secondary because for the curriculum to work in secondary there needs to be many more teachers, teaching a broader range of subjects. To manage this, year groups have become the contact groups. Teachers and other staff must maintain 2-metre social distancing.

There has been additional guidance about how children should be managed within the classroom e.g. children in rows facing the front, rather than facing each other. Protective equipment has been discussed where needed, and the important role the Test Trace Protect strategy plays in maintaining confidence. The one area of school life that has been more challenging is home-to-school transport. We have moved to a position that on our school transport any child over the age of 11 must wear a face covering. We have taken the approach that we will act as guides – signing off on all of the risk assessments – but we can't set countywide approaches because so many schools are different in the nature of their estate: Raglan, with open plan classes, compared with Cantref, an older school with traditional classrooms, for example. Face coverings are another example of this. 2 of the 4 secondary schools have taken a risk-based approach to face-coverings. King Henry VIII took the decision early that, because their halls are not very wide and they therefore couldn't guarantee social distancing, their pupils will wear face coverings. Conversely, Chepstow feels comfortable in its risk assessment. I am in contact with all of the Heads on this matter, and understand their positions. This mixed picture is repeated throughout Gwent. Caerphilly has taken the decision to have face coverings in the classroom, though that is not in the guidance. We had a very good conversation last week with Steve Davies, Director of Education in Wales, confirming that everything should be about caution and ensuring that measures taken are proportional to the risk, while allowing room for escalation, if needed.

Challenge:

We have tried to ensure that parents don't congregate when collecting their children from primary schools; do we have a picture of that across the county?

Yes, this will need to be reinforced. I have a meeting this afternoon with our headteachers in which this matter will surely be raised. Two schools have raised the possibility of road closures in order to manage the parents queueing more effectively. If it determined that something needs to be done then we will certainly ensure that the message is issued on a countywide basis.

Perhaps, once parents get used to the idea of not taking their children directly to the school door we can address the concept of the 'school run' itself – mostly for considerations of safety.

Yes, we are out for consultation on our Active Travel measures at the moment – schools are a fundamental part of that. Having spoken to several headteachers, I know that they are trying very hard to engage their children with questions of how they can come to school safely without a car. This is a key consideration for us, particularly in the broader scheme of climate reduction and adaptation ambitions.

Are school bus drivers wearing masks? Is there a different mask for buses and communal areas? If there are no masks, does the school provide them?

Bus drivers must wear a mask unless they have a medical condition which precludes them from doing so. It is the same for children on the bus. The information has been communicated clearly to the contractors and drivers. The same mask can be worn in both settings. A small supply of masks has already been made available to the schools, if children need one to be provided. Yesterday, Welsh Government announced funding that will allow all local authorities to provide all secondary schools with a supply of face coverings.

What are the specific workings of a lockdown such as the one in Caerphilly – is an entire year group locked down together for 14 days, for example?

It depends on how the contact is made. The advice around self-isolation comes from the Test And Trace advisers, not from our interpretation of guidance. We understand the point at which we have to communicate with our colleagues in T&T, and that's also around the fact that they are advised of any positive tests by the testing regime as well. The case in Caerphilly was a teacher who tested positive: their contact with the class had been determined as being a close one, so that class was asked to self-isolate for 14 days. At that point, those individuals have to self-isolate but family members don't. If one of those children becomes symptomatic, they should have a test, as should their family members.

What has been our allocation of extra teaching assistants provided to help children to catch up on the time they have missed?

Yes, Welsh Government allocated £28m for the Accelerated Learning Programme (ALP). Monmouthshire's share of that over the full year is about £517,000. We distributed that to schools this week, with the terms and conditions: that is to recruit teachers for this academic year to help interventions in schools. There's a range of different approaches to doing that; headteachers are working through what they see as the best approaches in their schools for children to receive that accelerated learning, where it is needed.

How was our ALP allocation determined? How many teachers does that represent on a yearly basis?

The allocation was predicated on total pupil numbers, percentage of pupil numbers in receipt of free schools meals, student numbers from a BAME background, and the number of learners who are in Welsh medium education but are from an English medium home – clearly, not being in school has been identified as a key risk for those learners. Welsh Government determined funding on a 50/50 split between those two factors. In discussion with headteachers and in terms of our aspirations and commitment to our FSM and closing the gap, we slightly adjusted that so that it was a 60/40 split: 60% of funding allocated on the number of pupils who are FSM, BAME and taught in Welsh but from an English medium home, and 40% on the total school numbers. We discussed that with the headteachers; one thing we did in response to the headteachers' request was to use the most up-to-date FSM numbers we had, which were obtained from our Benefits service, as we've been paying FSM payments directly since the lockdown began.

Will there be a programme to help FSM children who have fallen behind, in addition to the additional teachers etc. which have already been allocated?

Sharon Randall-Smith answered this question:

In any conversations with schools, those learners are always a key focus. In addition to the ALP that schools will be able to access, they have their own Pupil Development Grant, which they are targeting towards the needs of our vulnerable pupils, including FSM pupils. Those plans are currently being developed and worked through with their challenge advisers. Our schools are as aware as we are that there is a gap in attainment, and that this group needs a lot of support. In many cases when schools are looking at who will come back and when, it is with an eye on those vulnerable groups to see who will need the longer time back in school to become used to being in school again, before everyone joins on 14th September. We, and EAS, will continue to work with schools to ensure they do their best to support these pupils.

Breakfast Clubs have been cancelled and there is no provision of hot food at lunchtime, what are the considerations for the impact of this on FSM pupils?

We know how important breakfast clubs are for parents. We are working closely with our schools to ensure that they are back up and running from 14th September. What's happened in the last few days in terms of management of contact groups will mean that there are further questions around breakfast clubs. But the clubs will certainly be another key area in my meeting this afternoon with headteachers. Until the end of this week, we are continuing to pay families for those children entitled to FSMs. Because of the broken nature of the return-to-school, with not everyone in at once, we didn't want to risk children not being able to access food on the days when they aren't in – so everyone is being paid during these two weeks. Welsh Government is supporting us in this. Our catering colleagues have worked very closely with schools to provide what is best for each school, which in most cases is a 'grab-and-go' sandwich bag, with a couple of choices each day. My understanding is that twice a week there's a hot baguette offer. As we look to the short-to-medium term, we are considering how hot meals can return, as it is so important those FSM pupils are supported as the colder months begin.

Afterschool clubs are also very important for supporting parents returning to work, is there an update on those?

Yes, the challenge is very similar to breakfast clubs. For example, one school has over 100 pupils in its breakfast club: these children have to stay in their contact groups, socially distanced. There might not be a large enough space for them all, but once more than one room is used, supervision must be doubled – the difficulties continue to multiply. These issues are replicated exactly for afterschool clubs. We need to work through these difficulties. Sue Hall, who works with our early year providers, and the partners who provide some of our afterschool clubs, is a key part of our discussions. We are really keen for both clubs to resume, but there are many practical considerations, including cleaning down the areas after groups have used them, the increased risk of transmission from groups potentially mixing, etc.

Chair's Summary:

Thanks to Officers Mclean and Randall-Smith for updating the committee, and many thanks to the school, transport, catering and cleaning staff for their work. The committee has been reassured on a number of points, though we will undoubtedly return to these topics in future meetings. Contingency plans relating to any future lockdowns will be a major concern.

5. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the previous meetings held on 9th July 2020 were confirmed and signed as an accurate record.

6. Work Planning

Councillor Brown requested consideration of the ALN strategy, as highlighted in the previous Estyn reports, as well as an update on the pupils from Mountain House school, following its closure, with particular regard to the alternative types of teaching which might be available to them. There is also the issue, given what is spent on ALN, of whether it is cost effective to consider a special school, or better to outsource.

Councillor Groucott recalled that in County Council it was proposed that in the post-Covid world there should be specific officers looking at the whole picture of supporting families that have been particularly impacted. As many of these families will have children, those officers could report to this committee on the problems being faced within families during the coming recession, and what the authority is able to do to try and ameliorate them.

Councillor Thomas would like to invite Jane Rodgers, Head of Children's' Services, to report on children who are in care, and vulnerable children. It will be important to continue to balance the committee's interests between education and broader concerns.

Councillor Powell would like the committee to consider what help can be given to young people who have left school but are not yet in work, given how high the unemployment level will be as a result of Covid-19. This might need to be considered at a later date, given how full the upcoming agenda will be.

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

The next meeting is on Tuesday 13th October 2020 at 10.00am.

The meeting ended at **11.40 am**