

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Children and Young People Select Committee held at Remote Meeting on Wednesday, 25th November, 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

Ian Bakewell, Housing & Regeneration Manager

APOLOGIES: E. Thomas, Church in Wales

1. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Jo Watkins declared a personal but non-prejudicial interest as a parent of a child in Caldicot SRB. Maggie Harris declared an interest as a governor at Deri View.

2. Homeless Briefing Report and emerging proposals for future delivery of homelessness

Officer Ian Bakewell presented the report and presentation, and answered the members' questions.

Challenge:

Many of the applicants need specialist accommodation and specialist support, which is not currently available. What are we doing for people with severe needs?

Safeguarding is at the forefront of everything that we do. Many of the placements are linked to that. It is still a challenge, but we are reasonably confident about the levels of placements we do that reflect risk assessments and involvement of other agencies. The problem is that, for example, we might have put someone in B&B for safeguarding reasons who otherwise might have been in shared accommodation or Solas. The outcome might not be the ideal placement, but it has been informed by a risk assessment or a safeguarding consideration. We move people quite often, when issues arise. This is an absolute priority for us but working within the parameters that we have is extremely challenging.

Is Welsh Government giving any funding to back up its new, and encouraging, proactive stance on homelessness?

We have Phase 2 homeless funding for a number of short term projects until April. For example, we're funding a drug and alcohol worker through GDAS. After 1st April, Welsh Government says there's nothing available, so we have to wait and see. If there isn't any funding, there will be a big problem across Wales. I would expect that there will be something. We will know next month.

Are things lined up to provide an emergency stopgap with B&Bs?

Yes, the concern is if our B&Bs refuse to give accommodation. If there were a number of them, it would be extremely difficult, and as things stand I don't have an answer to that. We would probably look for assistance to do something like Gilwern again. There is some capacity in the system and we have reassurances from the majority to get us to Christmas, and some to April. We can use Welsh Government Hardship funding to help us on that. It doesn't necessarily give us any guarantees. I'm reasonably confident.

Is the Pobl work to provide temporary accommodation in progress?

Colleagues in the Partnerships team have done a lot of work with Pobl, in terms of remodelling. Unfortunately, in order to cement this arrangement they have had to decommission two services. The Pobl work is due to kick in on 1st April – they have been very flexible and supportive.

Are there fewer B&B bookings now because of Covid, and will that create a problem at a later stage?

Yes, we are in a bit of a luck situation. Prior to Covid, we were only using one B&B in the county. We have been able to benefit from the lack of tourism and take on more local B&Bs. There might be some risk with this, as mentioned above. I think there is a little bit of assurance because we have propped up a number of businesses during this time.

Does the youth need for mental health and substance misuse support need be highlighted to Welsh Government?

Looking at the positives of the situation, it has highlighted opportunities and needs. With Welsh Government's changing view, they are probably using it as an opportunity to tackle rough sleeping and youth homelessness – it looks like we are heading towards a situation where everybody can get assistance for homeless accommodation. It's creating an opportunity to think about the deficiencies and support needs that we have. Welsh Government knows the challenges that we and other local authorities have. All local authorities have been given a relationships manager, so our dialogue with Welsh Government is now more regular. It's going in the right direction.

Should social housing landlords do more to provide accommodation?

Yes, our social landlords are massive partners in this. So far, they are being supportive but they are only geared up for low need applicants. I'm hopeful that they will change and be more aligned with the reality of the situation. At the moment, they are looking at our Housing Support Grant programme. I'm not sure how that will unravel. From a regulatory perspective, I know that Welsh Government has this on its radar as well, and they ask us for feedback about how housing associations are supporting us. I'm reasonably confident about our housing association partners but there are lots more conversations for us to have.

What is the thinking around the Strategic Housing piece and this new regional board? Has that been on the backburner? What is the housing team's input into that?

Yes, this needs to be a whole systems approach and the situation has highlighted the need to build more affordable homes. We have had that conversation internally and at informal Cabinet yesterday. This is something that I am very interested in. The concern, going forward, is new homes coming online, from whatever source.

What discussions are we having in relation to the council's Poverty Plan and the PSB, and the Mental Health service?

Yes, Judith Langdon and I have made connections in regards to the Poverty plan. Homelessness is not a distinct priority of the plan, but I have suggested that homelessness and housing is a theme to run through all aspects of that plan. As you have said, if we get housing right then other benefits will follow. The next step in that regard is to talk to other housing organisations to identify whether there are more opportunities where we can link with other agencies to support this agenda. As an example, many of the young people that we work with have nothing behind them – no bank accounts or savings, and therefore no way to look forward to acquiring property of their own. I am keen to have this sort of conversation. The role of health: this situation has shown that a lot of support needs are above Housing. We currently accommodate a number of people where medical circumstances are appropriate. If we can facilitate with that, we will. I've had conversations with various different sections of the community mental health team. Health now has a Housing person who is our 'go-to'. The work that we are currently doing with GDAS is very interesting and there are more conversations to have with them.

To what extent has training support been given to your team when dealing with people with a lot of problems, particularly around addiction?

Relatively little. Staff have been through drug awareness training in the past, but this probably needs refreshing. We need to work towards a psychologically and trauma aware service, as noted by Councillor Groucott. This will involve training and thinking differently. Perhaps there are parts of the service that are traditional, and we have ambitions (regardless of Welsh Government guidance) to operate the Homeless service in a very different way. Staff needs to understand this area better, and have greater links with the services that provide that support. The GDAS worker that we have is a completely new relationship and is very positive, though in its infancy.

Given the lack of housing, we need properties with single flats for young people – a whole house might not be needed.

One bedroom accommodation is the emerging priority. It is our focus, and young people will benefit from that.

Chair's Summary:

The committee gives its thanks to the team. In terms of the development of children and young people, the provision of decent affordable housing is critical.

Recommendation 1 is supported. Councillor Groucott proposed a recommendation to appoint a specialist officer to support young people who need 24hr help, a specialist officer who is trained in mental health problems, and recommended a psychologically and trauma aware service with clear systems that provide professional external agency support. He also proposed that a Cabinet member with responsibility in this area attends CYP on a 6 monthly basis to give a specific update on support. The committee agreed these recommendations. Councillor Brown requested feedback about what the Officer thinks of these recommendations. Ian Bakewell replied that he is happy with the recommendations, though with the caveat that they will be resource dependent – all of the progress made by the service will be dependent on staffing. The report to Cabinet due in January will cover resources, which should address the issues highlighted by Councillor Groucott's recommendations.

3. Additional Learning Needs Strategy

Officers Will Mclean, Jacquelyn Elias, Morwenna Wagstaff and Lucie Doyle delivered the report and answered the members' questions.

Challenge:

What support will be given to teachers to ensure that this provision, and the teachers, are woven seamlessly into school?

Currently, we call them Special Needs Resource bases but 'Special Needs' is not going to remain the terminology – we are looking at a rebranding of our specialist provision. Schools that host our resource provision must work in partnership with the local authority. Our Special Needs Professional Network group is a really important strand in the development of the relationships/codependencies that we have. These schools provide specialist education for our most vulnerable children; therefore, we need to have quality assurance that that is the best education these children can have and that staff are appropriately supported through training and other initiatives. The culture and ethos of the schools are also extremely important. It is a critical relationship that is growing and is extremely positive. We have over 150 places already across the authority, and it's really important that there's a consistency in practice and in our vision of what we want from these resource bases. We are driving towards ALN Centres of Excellence; this will only be achieved by working in partnership.

Welsh medium teaching has grown in Monmouthshire. Do we now have Welsh-speaking language therapists?

The number of Welsh-speaking professionals in SE Wales is an ongoing issue. How we can address this is a subject of discussions in our consortia. For example, we currently don't have any Welsh-speaking educational psychologists but we know that there are some in Blaenau Gwent. We look at using an original resource to fill that gap while we look proactively for colleagues to learn Welsh, or to recruit those who already do. There's currently one Welsh speaking language therapist in Aneurin Bevan. We will continue to identify this as a priority through our WESP.

Is it intended that the additional provision proposed for Deri View will stay there once Deri View closes, moves to the secondary school site in Abergavenny, and is replaced on that site by the Welsh medium school?

It is our hope that we will be able to create an SNRB facility that will take children from ages 3 to 19, providing continuing support throughout. It would not see an English medium SNRB stay on the Deri View site. We are looking at a new provision that will enhance the capacity in Monmouthshire. Currently, in the north we are beginning to work on an understanding with our parents and schools that there should be a continuation of education from when children start in Overmonnow through to Monmouth Comprehensive. The same in the south of the county between Pembroke and Caldicot. It gives us a great opportunity in Abergavenny to do that on a single site.

The new legislation will see very clear responsibilities from birth to age 24. How can the transition from school into adult life be seen through smoothly?

Regarding early years provision, we are in a strong position with the ALN reform because we have had dedicated early years psychologists for a number of years now. Those processes around supporting pre-school children have been in place for some time. Support through a broader local authority early years ALN team is fairly strong. Post-16 is a new challenge for

Monmouthshire. Until now, the remit was for children with statements until they are 19. There has been a lot of work with this recently. This Friday, we are holding our first post-16 transition steering group where we are piloting the new transition protocol in Monmouth comprehensive this year that was previously trialled in Torfaen, in the hope that in September we will have a proper local understanding of need. We will have adapted the protocol to meet Monmouthshire's comprehensives' needs, and those links with the colleges and work placements so that we will be in a better position to support children with ALNs, and young people beyond the end of school. There is more of a focus on children who don't necessarily have current statements of SEN – it is about picking up all those other children who might have additional learning needs but are being met in the mainstream provision with additional support. *Cabinet indicated previously that they would look at a specialist school covering autism and special educational behaviour disorders. The report mentions 'invest to save' but we spend millions for independent schools or other local authorities to cover children who can't be educated in mainstream. This report doesn't address this concern?*

In the last stages of the Mounton House discussion Cabinet committed itself to ensuring 'provision' was made, which is not necessarily the same thing as a school. We had one very specific type of specialist school when Gwent was disaggregated into the 5 local authorities. When Gwent was in existence, there were more general specialist schools. As a small authority there will always be children whose needs are at such a level, and so demanding, that they have to go to a different setting to receive that level of care and support. What we are looking to do is to create capacity. If you were to visit one of our SNRBs, you would see children with a very high need being supported. They are not necessarily with their peer group all of the time; hopefully, by placing them in those settings, they can access some of that collegiate time. Please don't think that the support isn't there for those children.

In terms of the more complex, and ever-increasing, neurodevelopmental challenges, the strategy document notes a really interesting piece of work being commissioned by the 5 local authorities to track the growing demand of different types of ALN over time. It is growing and we will have to think very carefully about how and where we will provide for it. The renewal of the 3-through-19 school in Abergavenny might provide us with that opportunity; that would become our centre of excellence for that type of provision. We are in discussions with the other directors within the greater Gwent area, and within the health authority, about a site in the south of the county that could have the potential for a regional solution. I am confident that with the work of the leaders that we have, we can develop the provision over time to meet the needs. But there will always be some children who have to go out of county. This is true even for some counties that have special schools: e.g. Torfaen places a significant number of children in an independent school in Monmouthshire. So a single school is not the answer to the challenges.

We have a great number of needs in our SNRBs, from children with significant ASDs, physical and mental difficulties; those needs are met very well. Where they can be included with the mainstream learners this is very beneficial, and encouraged. We have a strong model that builds capacities in our mainstream schools, and enhances the skills of mainstream staff. There is a huge amount to celebrate in the work that we are doing – there is more to do, as the strategy document lays out, but we are offering something unique in Monmouthshire, and the facilities and skills of staff are the equal of anything in special schools.

It's very difficult to find the number of pupils who are in each category. The number of statements to 2019 is shown as decreasing, but would the number not have increased due to the individual development plan, and not needing a medical assessment?

We present to DMT every month a detailed breakdown of our ALN and SEN needs so at any point in time we will have that data available should any councillor wish to see it.

Recently, a Caldicot resident wasn't offered a local place for their child, but had to go to Monmouth – do we actually have sufficient capacity for our primary needs, and do we plan to increase it?

There is an imbalance between primary and secondary capacity in terms of the size of the SNRBs. We need to wait and see what the Mastadon review of expected demand coming through the system is, then we can make a good decision about where we invest for future capacity. The opportunity to grow the capacity in Abergavenny, and support the north-west of the authority, is a big step forward. That will be online by 2024, and will displace some of the children who currently have to travel to Monmouth, and hopefully will have the benefit of equalising across the 3 settings. We will continue to ensure that the centres are big enough.

What is our strategy for dealing with children with emotional and social behavioural difficulties, and where are we planning to place them? What about trauma-informed behaviour?

We are on a mission to build the understanding, and therefore the capacity, within our mainstream schools, that behaviour is a communication and is a reflection of an emotional or additional learning need that is perhaps going unmet. We are part of the CAMHS transformation steering group – some of the projects coming out of that include work with community psychology and whole-school approaches to mental health and emotional wellbeing. A lot of the work is promoting understanding and promoting good practice about what the behaviours tell us. The evidence currently shows that relationships are the key to meeting those needs. Lots of that work can be done in mainstream settings.

Some of our children with the most complex level of need, around early relational trauma are supported through the SAPRA programme or having a statement, and have bespoke and flexible provision within Monmouthshire to meet those needs. We are trying very hard to develop capacity in this area. We have been a bit curtailed by the pandemic, so our focus switched a little to supporting children with the lockdown – but this also opened a lot of doors to engage with schools over this understanding of behaviour and emotional states. We have done a cross-directorate proposal, with some money from the Wellbeing grant, to identify a workstream guidance and professional training for staff in dealing with children exhibiting emotionally based school avoidance. We hope to roll that out in January, following consultation with headteachers. Schools need to enhance, and invest in, the relationships with these children, many of whom don't need a specialist provision.

Website information for parents has been a massive issue – how is this being improved?

Yes, website development was picked up by Estyn. It is in our Workstream A. Regionally, a group led by Snap is developing a whole suite of information for parents. This will go to DMT so that colleagues can see what has been developed in collaboration with parents; this will be the beginning of our revised website. All feedback will be extremely welcome.

Is it sensible that we're developing capacity to deal with children with challenging behaviour only after having shut down the specialist school at Mounton House?

The important thing to note is that there have always been children with emotional and social behavioural needs who have not got near the threshold for needing to attend Mounton House. So we are not necessarily talking about the same population as those children that went to Mounton House. We are taking the decision around the principal educational psychology and the wellbeing leads, seeking to ensure that our professionals are as well-equipped and well informed about the latest developments in how we support the much bigger population that have always resided in our schools, so that we can make their school experience better. Our number placed in Mounton House was decreasing, and we weren't able to support all of the children in Monmouthshire because it was a boys-only facility. This is about a much broader set of interventions.

Is it correct that we're only covering children/young people up to 19, rather than 24? If so, why?

In terms of school, our responsibility will be as it is now: up to 19. As part of the post-16 work referred to earlier, there will be other provision that we will look at for those moving into further education at age 19 but we don't know what that will look like at this stage. There will perhaps be pressure on colleges to provide placements for longer than Welsh Government originally thought would be possible. This is an evolving landscape. We will be responsible for the child/young adult's IP up to the age of 24, if that's still appropriate, but it won't be within our schools.

12.i in the strategy, mentions improving capacity but previously it said to reduce capacity. Why?

The change in legislation brings with it significant expectations, including of roles. We now have an early years ALN lead, Drs Doyle and Banks are leads for Wellbeing, and we recently recruited into our educational psychology team. Because of the approach that we are taking, we are now attracting very high quality professionals who want to come to Monmouthshire because of the ethos and approach that we have set out. We are upskilling and creating greater capacity because the Act demands that, but the most significant shift is the piece around relational aspects. It is about us empowering our SNRBs to provide the best that they can, but also that we have a key role in maintaining equity and excellence across those bases.

13, how will we judge if the strategy is successful – are we going to have baseline quantitative data?

Yes, Estyn identified this too. We've been looking at the best I.T. software to help our resource bases make appropriate assessments of our young people, and then be able to plot and report on their progress. Two of our resource bases were already using a tool called B Squared, and we have agreed that all of us will take this forward. RCT have done something similar recently; we have a meeting this Friday to learn more about how they used it.

Also under 13, are we missing a subtlety regarding meeting the needs of the children even if the parents/carers disagree?

There will inevitably be tensions between what professional colleagues identify as a child's needs and what type of setting can meet those needs, and what parents and carers sometimes want to see their children access. That tension works in both ways: sometimes, we have suggested that a child requires an independent specialist setting but the parents very much want their needs to be met in a mainstream school, and vice versa. But having that very clear commitment that parents recognise the levels of skill and capacity in our settings, and understand the route we're taking, is really important. The driving force of the ALN reform is

person-centred practice. At age 16, the child will be asked what they want, and this will drive provision from that point.

As part of the recommendations, can the draft report be updated with figures from the cover report, with an explanation of why they are going up or down?

Yes, we will make sure they are put into further drafts.

Chair's Summary:

We welcome the report and give our thanks to the team. In a broad-ranging discussion, we have covered provision and where the unit from Deri View will move to. The members have highlighted early identification. Maggie Harris has raised the point that some children have flourished from being at home and via blended learning. There seems to be general agreement for this report going forward, with the points that we have raised today. I feel strongly that children need to be supported up to the age of 24-25. As Welsh medium develops, there needs to be specialist support for those young people.

4. Children and Young People Select Committee Forward Work Programme

We will next look at Play provision and Welsh medium provision. Councillor Brown asked to consider other ALN strategies in Gwent as an item for future meetings.

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

There is a potential change in membership to this committee, with David Hughes-Jones possibly stepping down, to be replaced by Frances Taylor.

The next meeting is 8th December, with Budget scrutiny on 19th January. The committee agrees to move meetings to Thursdays.

The meeting ended at **12.42 pm**