

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Children and Young People Select Committee held at Remote Meeting on Tuesday, 19th January, 2021 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

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

County Councillors: L.Brown, M.Groucutt, M.Lane and M. Powell,

Also in attendance: County Councillors L.Dymock, P. Murphy, A. Watts and S. Woodhouse:

Officers in Attendance

Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Will McLean, Chief Officer for Children and Young People
Peter Davies, Chief Officer, Resources
Sharon Randall-Smith, Head of Achievement and Attainment
Nikki Wellington, Finance Manager
Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Tyrone Stokes, Accountant
Julie Boothroyd, Chief Officer Social Care, Safeguarding and Health
Jonathan Davies, Central Accountancy Finance Manager
Dave Loder, Finance Manager

APOLOGIES: None.

1. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

2. Public Open Forum

No members of the public were present.

3. Budget Monitoring:Scrutiny of the budget monitoring capital and revenue position at Month 7, setting the context for scrutiny of budget proposals.

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

Challenge:

Are we working closely with colleagues in health and children's services so we know well in advance which children coming through will need to go to out-of-county provision later, so we can build the costs into the budget for years ahead?

We are well aware of the education costs coming through, and in recent years we have seen an improvement in forecasting. In recent months, we have put in place a tracker that will track pupils from the start of their education, and therefore the costs as they move through their education. That will certainly give us a lot more clarity around the future costs for all of our pupils. We work very closely with health and education colleagues. When a child is presented to

the local authority, we have a multi-agency approach: we deal with health, and try to secure the appropriate funding; similarly with education, and if they need higher education support, we can again tap into the relevant body. In Social Care and Children's Services, we have had a tracker in place for the last 7 or 8 years. A few years ago, officers brought a paper to this committee covering the range of unit costs for a looked-after child: on average, it is £45k per year. But there is a big variation: if children are in foster care, the unit cost is £28-30k per year but if they are in out-of-county residential care, it could be as much as £300-500k per year. Children's Services are now in a very good place, having bolstered our intervention and prevention, and have done a fantastic job in recent years. Looked-after children numbers are stabilising at 220. What we can't reassure members is how the numbers will fluctuate as we come out of the pandemic, and the direction the courts will give us. Another paper that went to members previously concerned the MIST support team that can look at more in-house and community-based services on offer, rather than having to put looked-after children into expensive out of county placements.

With pressures on budgets, are we still investing heavily in prevention and family support services? Presumably, the stabilised numbers are unlikely to continue when the effects of the pandemic hit later on?

Yes, this is the difficulty now: as we start moving out, we can't be complacent that the numbers are stabilising. We are still heavily investing in the preventative intervention services, and in next year's budget, we are looking to address the in-year deficit for children's services – so we are continuing that investment as well.

Could we have the overall figure of what the overall deficit in month 7 is, and how it relates to the CYP budget?

The Month 7 deficit was on overspend of £6.43m for the council revenue fund, of which £5.91m related to Covid. In terms of children's services, none of that relates to Covid – any Covid-related pressures there have been recovered fully through the Hardship fund. The overspend in children's services is £1.46m, which relates to the costs we would have had anyway, due to an increase in looked-after children numbers (just over £1.1m), the in-year increased pay award and the legal costs. CYP is £125k over.

There is clearly a financial benefit to recruiting our own staff in children's services, as well as a human one. Might the cost of agency staff be removed in the next year?

When we set the budget, we had 197 looked-after children, which increased to 218 within a few months. This impacts on the other support services: legal, transportation and staffing. Sometimes we have to go to agency staff to tide us over while we're trying to recruit, and to deal with a sharp increase in looked-after numbers. We have a workforce plan and a group that looks at this on an ongoing basis to see how we can maximise the opportunity to recruit in-house.

What proportion over the 12 months has been agency staff, and what is the contract commitment for an agency worker?

A few years ago, our percentage of agency staff was much higher. The staffing complement in children's services is probably more stable than it has been in the last decade. As mentioned above, there is an active plan that reviews and monitors the agency requirement and uptake. We are attracting quality people who want to work and stay in Monmouthshire, but there are times when there are sickness issues, vacancies, etc., and getting someone in of the right

quality can sometimes take time. We have been running agency staff on longer contracts – there isn't a designated level, it's about the service and operational needs at a particular time. We have been able to convert some agency staff into our own staff, which is very positive. But we accept that there can be disruption in having agency staff. The plan is to have our own workforce but there will always be some agency staff. Currently, we have 6 agency staff – around 8%. At the start of the year, it was 12-13 agency staff: this year, we've managed to reduce our agency use by half, and convert the staff over.

What is the financial difference between employing an agency member and developing our own staff?

It isn't a straightforward answer because we can flex the hours that agency staff work. Overall, the impact this year is around £200-250k but we have managed to negotiate with Welsh Government to try to get some of that through the Hardship Fund where it does relate to increased pressure.

Appendix 3 refers to a slippage of £12.5m in the 21st Century Schools initiative in Abergavenny, which is a concern. Can we have reassurance that the project is on track and on time?

There have been delays in the project due to the current situation with the pandemic. We have appointed the project managers and architects, so it is moving forward and we can assure members that we are working towards the 2024 opening date – everything is currently on track for that.

Chair's Summary:

Officers have outlined the difficulties and the cost of the number of looked-after children rising from 197 to 220. That has a cost implication, with an increase in legal fees and the pay increase for staff. We had detailed questions about the budget and areas related to Covid, and the use of agency staff, which has a major cost – and human – implication. In terms of the CYP budget, it is pleasing that fewer schools are in deficit, though 3 still are. There is a benefit in not having to pay the leisure centres. Overall, we seem to be in a stronger position going forward for CYP, with no major cuts in the coming year. It is also pleasing to hear that the new 3-19 school is moving forward

4. Budget Scrutiny: Scrutiny of the budget proposals for 2021/22.

Peter Davies, Nicola Wellington and Tyrone Stokes delivered the presentation and report, and answered the members' questions, along with Julie Boothroyd and Cabinet Member Phil Murphy.

Challenge:

Monlife must have lost a lot of revenue from schools using leisure centres, as well as gyms being closed. Are we happy that Monlife will be able to ride the storm?

Timing couldn't have been any worse for Monlife, in terms of what has happened this year. The income losses suffered by Monlife have been met in full by Welsh Government through the Covid Hardship Fund – to their credit, they have followed through with funding dealing with income shortfalls resulting from the pandemic. We expect this to continue into next year until services are back up and running. Monlife is confident of footfall returning when things can reopen fully. While we have furloughed a number of Monlife staff, we have drawn on that capacity release to support Test, Trace and Protect, and assisted with Business Grants administration, and it will assist in supporting some of the pandemic rollout, working with health.

As our levels of looked-after children have increased, is there any scope for additional grants from Welsh Government, particularly if the increase is greater than in other local authorities?

There have been some small amounts of funding that have helped on the periphery, but nothing specifically for looked-after children. Over a year ago, a Welsh Government task force assessed our strategy around the reduction in looked-after children, and we have to report on a quarterly basis as to how we are progressing. So it is being observed very closely from a Welsh Government perspective. Our numbers plateaued this year, which we hope will continue. Small amounts of grant money that have come through have been helpful in bolstering intervention and prevention provision, to prevent escalation further up into more costly services. We hope to be able, through the evidence gathered from that, to secure other monies.

Are the 3 remaining pupils at Mounton House still based there, and is that under the PRU? What is the plan for them?

The 3 pupils referred to are the Monmouthshire pupils who were in Mounton House when it closed. Two have now moved into independent provision, one has moved over to PRS. The cost for all 3 has been built in and will be included in the tracker mentioned earlier as we move forward.

Is the PRS based in Mounton House? Are there other pupils for PRS based there?

Mounton House remains vacant. There would be a business case to back that provision if we did decide to move in that way, but it wouldn't be one pupil, it would be the PRS service. We are looking at that option but there are cost implications to work through.

There is a concern about the collection of council tax following the economic effects of Covid, and the demographic changes. Has that been properly evaluated and factored into the calculations?

The tax yield is predicated on us determining a council tax base for the council. One of the drivers behind that is a forecast and assessment of the number of chargeable dwellings and new properties being built. The second key consideration is the council tax collection rate. We have in fact retained an underlying assumption of a 99% collection rate because our data shows strength and a positive rebound on collection. If we compare to other authorities in Wales, overall we have a much stronger recovery position. We are comfortable in holding it at 99%. The challenges our communities are facing are at the heart of the work done by Richard Jones (Policy and Governance) and his team, looking at the overall Wellbeing and Future Generations Equality Impact assessment – council tax is a key feature of that. It also looks at the impact of the array of budget proposals and where that ends up on those with lower incomes. Council Tax reduction schemes and discounts available to families are important. It is a very difficult balance for the council to strike, given its finances. Cabinet is proposing a 4.9% increase but safeguards and mitigations are in place around the discounts on offer.

Regarding the list of potential risks, are we confident evaluating the investments that we aren't affecting our ability to borrow in the future?

Yes, the slide on risks and considerations wasn't exhaustive. One bullet point talks about the pressures that we aren't currently aware of – this is the strategic risk register, highlighting where we have risks that could materialise. The budget is predicated on a set of assumptions. If, for example, an officer were to ask for extra money in a budget proposal for extra pressures but wasn't able to provide evidence that those pressures were forthcoming, it wouldn't work its way in. The reasonable assumption that has been introduced is based on the looked-after children

pressure that we have to accommodate, and the fact that it is stabilised. We look at each case in isolation and comfort ourselves on the underlying assumptions. We don't want to base things on risks that are more probable than likely, because if they are probable then prudence would dictate that they be incorporated in some way in the budget.

Looking at the existing risks, and our potential inability to borrow, is there potential risk on funding across the board?

We are governed by the Prudential Code, which determines that our borrowing is affordable, sustainable and prudent. Indicators set thresholds within which we work. We have sufficient headroom in our borrowing capabilities. Ultimately, the ability to determine whether our borrowing is sustainable, prudent and affordable will be couched within our ability to fund it within the revenue budget i.e. the borrowing costs in terms of interest and repayment, which is called MRP. We don't have any concerns in that regard at this point. For further information, the treasury strategy is going to Audit Committee and then Council on 11th March, and will draw those conclusions.

Chair's Summary:

Questions were asked about Monlife and sustainability, issues of grants for looked-after children, and matters relating to Council tax collection, as well as broader questions deemed to be outside the scope of this committee. For information: there will be a virtual consultation over the next 4 weeks. The website's budget page will contain an overview, a link to the core budget consultation presentation, budget papers, a blog from Cabinet Member Phil Murphy, and a feedback form. Answers to general questions related to the budget can be found in the Cabinet papers.

5. Verbal update on the position with schools and blended learning: Chief Officer, Children and Young People

Will McLean delivered the update and answered the members' questions:

On 17th December, the local authority decided its return to school plans, with agreement that the first 2 days of the term should be remote learning, with face-to-face resuming on 6th January. That decision was communicated to parents, and we agreed to meet on 4th to appraise the evolved situation. On 4th, we discussed changing our plans; however, our local discussions were superseded by the Minister's intervention: she announced that all schools would remain on remote learning until 18th January. When the decision to return on 6th was made, the rate in Monmouthshire was 409 per 100,000; when we discussed it again on 4th, the rate had fallen to 316 per 100,000. Debates with the Minister continued, then on 8th January she announced that education would form part of the 3-weekly review cycle, that there would be no face-to-face learning for the vast majority of pupils until 28th January at the earliest, and it would likely be half term before the majority of pupils began phasing back into school.

Two factors surrounded that discussion: were schools a safe place for pupils and staff, and the impact on the R number of closing schools to face-to-face learning. Discussions with Trade Unions have focussed on the first factor, but always with due regard to the second. The outcome is that our schools are currently open, providing remote learning to the vast majority of pupils, with two key exceptions: vulnerable children and children of critical workers. For the former, we have worked very closely with Social Services colleagues to determine 6 categories

of learners who fall into that group – our underlying principle is that anyone who is safer at school than at home should be in school. For the latter, there have been a couple of changes from the first lockdown when our schools provided Hub provision: first, it has become apparent that only one parent has to be a critical worker in order to access the provision, and second, Welsh Government has published a list of occupations that qualify as ‘critical work’, to which we can work. But we continually stress that face-to-face learning should be a last resort for families. At primary and secondary, 908 pupils have registered as critical worker children; on average, last week 570 attended school. 363 vulnerable learners have registered, with an average of 218 attending last week. The range of attendee numbers depends on the location and context of a school, and the community it serves e.g. Osbaston has 100 registered children, with none or only a few registered in the more rural schools. Overall, this is a significant increase on the last week of Hub provision, in which approximately 400 children attended. This rate is likely to increase if we remain in the remote learning pattern for an extended period.

This is challenging for a number of reasons. In Spring 2020, schools were repurposed to provide childcare, but now are expected to deliver education. This draws on the schools’ resources, as they are supporting both children in school and those accessing remote learning, which in turn affects staff management. We have been in debates with headteachers and union colleagues about how staff are managed. Another challenge is the significant pressure on parents: there are schools with very high parental expectations as well as families that, for a variety of good reasons, don’t always have the means by which to support their children. It is therefore a difficult line to walk for schools, as some families want more work and others want less. We are working closely with the Education Achievement Service to identify best practice.

Children’s wellbeing is the critical element throughout this period. Over time, we need to think about how we establish that wellbeing support. Another critical factor to consider is the different approaches to remote learning given the range in age of pupils.

Clarifying definitions is important. ‘Distanced learning’ is the same as ‘remote learning’, defined as ‘an approach that combines face-to-face and distance learning experiences. Face-to-face learning and distance learning should complement each other, driven by a single curriculum.’ ‘Blended learning’ is learning that is provided by a combination of face-to-face learning and distance learning tasks and activities. The ‘Flipped classroom’ is often mentioned in this regard. ‘Face-to-face learning’ is that which is received when children are physically in a school. ‘Synchronous learning’ is when teachers and learners attend a lesson at the same time, either face-to-face or online i.e. a live lesson. ‘Asynchronous learning’ is when teachers provide learning materials (videos, audio clips, presentations, etc.) which are uploaded to a platform like Hwb, which can then be accessed by students at any time. ‘Online learning’ (or ‘e-learning’) is education that takes place over the internet, so a different type of distanced-learning. Headteachers will talk about these approaches at the seminar on Thursday.

We continue to offer through the EAS a significant amount of professional learning for our schools so they are fully aware of the latest techniques and approaches. We are looking at how we develop and share best practice across the region.

Challenge:

What is the situation now with laptop and equipment provision?

In the first lockdown, there was a big push to provide equipment to children, with significant amounts of kit given out. Understanding the level of need that remains was our first

consideration following the Minister's statement on 4th January, so we have been working closely with the schools and the digital team. As of yesterday, we had 37 requests for laptops across our schools; they have been sourced and will be with those families by the end of the week. The procedure is: we acquire the equipment and install Neverware, which, essentially, turns a laptop into a Chromebook, which provides all the functionality necessary to access Hwb, Google Classroom and other platforms used to provide learning to children. At the start of the pandemic, we purchased a significant number of My-Fi, which are dongles providing a direct internet connection, for households with a broadband problem. We have a number of those left and will continue to provide those as needed. Welsh Government did bring forward quite considerably its EdTech funding to renew IT stock in schools as a matter of course. There has been a global supply chain challenge in terms of the significant demand for equipment but we have 300 Chromebooks being built for us now, and 170 other devices – so over 450 devices that will be rolled out to schools in the coming weeks. As this happens, the older kit can have Neverware installed, and passed out to families, should the need still exist.

What percentage of children are receiving live lessons?

The benefit of synchronous/live learning is a perceived one – research shows that it is not found to be of greater benefit than other means of delivering remote learning. The Educational Endowment Foundation says, “Pupils can learn through remote learning. Ensuring the elements of effective teaching are present – for example, clear explanations, scaffolding and feedback – is more important than how or when they are provided. There was no clear difference between learning in real time (synchronous) and alternatives (asynchronous). For example, teachers might explain an idea live or in a pre-recorded video. What matters most is whether the explanation builds clearly on pupils' prior learning or how pupils' understanding is subsequently assessed.” This shows that both approaches have a place. It's impossible to say that 'one size fits all.' Having a child in front of a laptop for a whole day is not a good outcome. Teacher and classroom engagement are really important. The way forward is probably to think about having some tasks be asynchronous, and some be synchronous in instances where pupils need contact with the teacher.

Are we tracking the level of engagement that pupils have with blended learning provision?

All of our schools track engagement levels. Some schools have better access to analytics than others, which we are working with our colleagues to understand. One of the challenges is that, inevitably, people will draw comparisons between classes within a school, between schools in an area, etc., but there are different approaches in different schools to pedagogy and how learning takes place. So some variance is to be expected. There can be a weakness if there are large numbers in a household trying to access the internet at the same time – having asynchronous resources that children can draw on later can be a benefit there.

Is there some form of emergency provision that we can put in place for those who need kit, rather than waiting for the order to go through? How does provision of equipment tally with the large uptake of FSM pupils?

We have seen significant growth in FSM, related to the economic impact of the pandemic. We pay any of our families who are entitled to FSMs directly on a weekly basis, £3.90 per day, per child. Regarding an emergency response, by the end of this week anyone that has indicated they are in need of equipment will have it. In terms of parental provision, we are providing this equipment to those families who need it. If access to learning were to continue to be a

challenge for a family then at some point it becomes a form of vulnerability, at which point we could think about providing a place in school for that learner, to access the resources there. But all of the evidence with which we have been provided is that the kit has been supplied to those households that need it.

For information, BT and EE are currently doing unlimited data at no extra cost to help with home learning.

Yes, the Chief Executive has been campaigning online recently to raise awareness of this, as some of those offers were available in England, and not necessarily in Wales. Schools have been trying to make families aware of those opportunities.

Chair's Summary:

We have had clarification about synchronous and a-synchronous learning. Parents have spoken to members about hardware – it is heartening to hear about the provision of those, and broadband, to low-income families. It is a major concern across the country, especially in families with numerous children and parents working from home. We will keep an eye on the matter. Councillor Dymock will share details of BT and EE's unlimited data offers. The committee gives its thanks to everyone working in education.

6. Children and Young People Select Committee Forward Work Plan

Welsh-medium workshop on 28th January at 2pm. CYP Select on 11th February to discuss the EAS Business Plan and FSM strategy.

7. Cabinet and Council Work Planner

8. To confirm the minutes of the previous meetings

The minutes were confirmed and signed as an accurate record.

9. To confirm the date and time of the next meeting as Special Meeting 11th February 2021 and 9th March 2021

The meeting ended at **12.33 pm**