

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Children and Young People Select Committee held at County Hall, Usk - Remote Attendance on Monday, 31st January, 2022 at 2.00 pm

Councillors in attendance

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

County Councillors: L.Brown, C.Edwards,
M. Powell, J.Watkins and P. Murphy
Also in attendance: County Councillor P. Murphy,
Cabinet Member for Resources

Officers in attendance

Will McLean, Chief Officer for Children and Young People
Jane Rodgers, Chief Officer for Social Care, Safeguarding and Health
Peter Davies, Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer, Resources
Nikki Wellington, Finance Manager
Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Tyrone Stokes, Accountant
Jonathan Davies, Acting Assistant Head of Finance
Chesney Chick, Service Manager - Youth Offending Service

Apologies: County Councillors M.Groucutt, D. Jones and M.Lane

1. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

2. Budget Scrutiny: Scrutiny of the budget proposals for 2022/23.

Cabinet Member Phil Murphy delivered the presentation with Nicola Wellington. Councillor Murphy, Will McLean, Tyrone Stokes and Jane Rodgers answered the members' questions.

Challenge:

Schools continue to receive grant funding at year end – could this committee have a report of what schools have spent these funds on, and the effect of that expenditure?

There has been a considerable amount of grant funding to schools in recent years, and throughout the pandemic there have been significant funding streams such as the 'Recruit, Recover, Raise Standards' initiative. That is to support learners and help them to catch up and close the gap that potentially widened during the pandemic. We work closely with our colleagues in the Education Achievement Service to understand the impact of that expenditure – it would be a very good report to bring to this committee, yes.

With school balances higher than in previous years, how will MCC ensure there is an appropriate balance between schools and other local authority expenditure, going forward?

As we've gone through the year the authority has faced significant pressures in our ALN budget, which has been difficult for us to manage; in particular, the costs of children remaining in county. It's appropriate for us to work with the schools in a mature way to understand where the needs

are – a great example of us doing that is the work that Nicola Wellington's been leading on revising the delegation methodology for additional needs funding. We hope to see more work like this in the future. Schools will probably see an uplift again in balances at the end of this year, which is likely to be inflated by year-end grants. Some of those will have specific spending criteria (and will therefore figure in the report requested in the first question), while others will go directly to the bottom line.

It's imperative that we are very clear with the schools that when significant balances have accumulated, they have robust plans that represent effective spending on their schools. We are talking to the schools about how we can help them to do that, ensuring that they understand the full flexibility and potential of procurement, thinking about the circular economy, and if there's capital expenditure, that they do so in an informed way that meets obligations around planning, building control, etc. As we go forward, there will probably need to be a re-balancing of the money that schools hold themselves and the money that we are able to afford centrally to support them.

The budget mentions the 21st Century Schools programme in relation to Abergavenny and Chepstow. Could you comment on progress?

We are reaching a crucial time concerning the new school in Abergavenny, with submission of the full business case imminent, as well as the submission for planning. On 19th January it was agreed to take the final step in the consultation regarding the closure of the two schools and opening of a new school. The call-in period ended on Friday so that will be enacted on 1st September 2023. As plans for Abergavenny progress, we are very aware of the development that we want to take place in Chepstow. We recruited a new member to the team, Tim Bird, as Educational Advisor – he is working with Cath Saunders (21st Century Project Lead) on Chepstow, and the potential there.

Budgetary pressures are ongoing and increasing. Can we have reassurance that there will never be a scaling back in the preventative approach to children being taken into care?

With Children's Services, the pressure is to allow us to still practise in the same way. With the budget pressure we are looking to recognise the change in the needs of the children, and even though we have some reassurance that the children looked after numbers are levelling out, we are getting more high costs – more 1-to-1 bespoke placements required. The £1.3m pressures broaden into 4 phases: looking to address the budgetary pressure for those children requiring high-cost bespoke placements (these tend to be out of county), stabilise our workforce, recognise the pressures that the court exhibits on us, and rewarding the pay structure to our kinship carers following some legal cases in other local authorities. We can give assurance that we are not looking to change the way that we practise. Our mandate is still early help and prevention right across the system, and we recognise that that's the way for us to build long-term sustainable and resilient families.

Regarding the Welsh Government settlement, are we being singled out because we're Monmouthshire, or is there a specific set of criteria?

No, it isn't because we're Monmouthshire. There are 50+ criteria such as the mix of housing, the type of roads that we have, areas of deprivation, etc. These criteria shift all the time. This year, the balance shifted so that we were the best funded, rather than the worst, but there is no guarantee that that will happen again. So, the settlement is determined by the way that the formulas move.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to the Cabinet Member and officers. Many areas have been clarified for the committee. We have been reassured about ensuring balance regarding schools, which have had increased budgets but during a period of enormous difficulties. It's important to remember that children who have particularly suffered during the pandemic are generally those from more deprived backgrounds. The ALN pressures in the county are quite large. The new ALN formula should make for better funding and organisation. Chepstow is a major concern, particularly for residents there. The LAC pressure is always an area of concern – that budget has to be protected and is more unpredictable than those in other areas of CYP. The officers' comments about this area are very reassuring. We are glad to hear that Monmouthshire is not being treated any differently than other authorities by Welsh Government, and it is good to see that pay will be dealt with centrally.

The committee is happy with the budget proposals brought before us today.

3. Youth Offending Service

Chesney Chick delivered the presentation and answered the members' questions.

Challenge:

How soon do you become aware of potential offenders?

We are a preventative service. There was a shift prior to my joining the team from dealing with people in custodial settings to dealing with people in the community, in a preventative way. We work very closely with our colleagues in children's services, education and other partner agencies to identify those who might have trigger points – whether they are ACEs or otherwise – that indicate that they might come to our attention. Then, we look at services in collaboration with partners such as the Youth Service, to develop resources within a particular area, if certain issues are starting to arise. If it's on an individual basis we would look at whether there is an in-house service which could meet that need.

As an example, during the lockdown an increase in domestic violence (child on primary carer) was identified. The information and data available from Monmouthshire and Torfaen children's services didn't indicate that that was a problem for us, but realised that they might not have been true figures, given that schools weren't in. We created 2 posts sitting within children's services that would help with the process, helping to identify potential cases and try to catch them preventatively.

While in lockdown, did online bullying and influencing rise, and were you able to do anything about it?

There was no data to suggest that there had been an increase but, anecdotally, some stories came through that there was potential for a rise. But nothing came directly to the attention of the Youth Offending Service. However, during the pandemic we used the digital platforms such as Teams to engage with the children that we are involved with, particularly during the summer: we gave them quizzes, for example, send them tasks in the post and then check back in with them to mark them, then give out prizes, etc. The idea was to keep them engaged. We were pleasantly surprised that there was a great uptake in those sessions – some found it easier to engage virtually than they would have done otherwise.

Being a joint service with Torfaen, is there a breakdown of the numbers for each local authority area? Have these changed over time?

Yes, there is a breakdown which we can present at a later date, if the committee wishes. There is a difference between the two areas that are longstanding and haven't changed throughout the pandemic. It is hard to give specific numbers at this time but typically, for example, if there are 10 from Torfaen the number from Monmouthshire would likely be 5-7. There is an indication that the gap is closing, however. The complexities of the cases remain the same, and the typical root problems remain consistent in the two areas.

Reports to Adults Select suggest that young people who need housing are presenting with more complex needs. They don't necessarily offend but is there any link between the YOS and housing, and what support is provided regarding complex needs?

Yes, it is well documented that children are coming through with more complex needs, For all cases with which the YOS is involved we have the Resettlement Panel, which looks specifically at our exit strategy, for example, in the case of a child who has been in custody and is returning to the community. Similarly, in a prevention case, for a child who had come to the end of their order the panel would discuss the case to ensure there is the right level of support as they exit our provision. Housing is on that panel, along with Careers Wales, Health, a drugs worker from Engage, and others, to ensure the ongoing package of support in the community is at the right level. We have good working relationships with Housing.

The local authority has a housing responsibility but not necessarily a security or health responsibility with regard to misuse of drugs and complex problems of this nature. They are finding problems in relation to the support available for those extra needs that Registered Social Landlords aren't able to provide?

Yes. From our perspective, it's vitally important that through the assessment process, we identify the child's core need – this can often be masked by other things. Historically, we might have worked on a drug problem that is really an emotional wellbeing/mental health issue. We try to ensure that this is addressed when the package of support is put together.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you for this report. The committee is clearer on how Covid has affected the service – it has been a difficult period for everyone, but particularly for some young people who are in difficult circumstances. It has been useful to hear about the support that families have had during the lockdown. We have discussed prevention, which is key, as we don't want children who come into the service's remit moving on to crime as teenagers and young adults. It is heartening to hear about the support that is given.

4. To confirm the date and time of the next meeting: 3rd March 2022 at 10.00am

The meeting ended at **3.30 pm**