

| Select Committee | date | (Draft) Minute |
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| Children and Young People Select Committee | 31 st January 2022 | <p>Cabinet Member Phil Murphy delivered the presentation with Nicola Wellington. Councillor Murphy, Will McLean, Tyrone Stokes and Jane Rodgers answered the members' questions.</p> <p>Challenge:</p> <p><i>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?</i></p> <p>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.</p> <p><i>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?</i></p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> |

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:

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| | | <p>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.</p> |
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