

EDUCATION & CHILDREN SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

22nd DECEMBER 2016

Present: Councillor J.E. Williams (Chair)

Councillors: C.A. Campbell, J.M. Charles, I.W. Davies, W.G. Hopkins, P. Hughes-Griffiths, J.D. James, P.E.M. Jones, M.J.A. Lewis, D.W.H. Richards

Councillor I.J. Jackson – Substitute for Councillor A. James

Mrs. V. Kenny – Roman Catholic Church Representative

Mrs. K. Hill – Parent Governor Member (Dinefwr Area)

Mrs. J. Voyle Williams – Church in Wales Representative

Also in attendance:

Councillor D.M. Jenkins – Executive Board Member for Resources

Councillor G.O. Jones – Executive Board Member for Education & Children

The following officers were in attendance:

Mr. C. Moore – Director of Corporate Services

Mr. G. Morgans – Interim Director of Education & Children's Services

Mr. A. Rees – Head of Learner Programmes

Mr. S. Smith – Head of Children's Services

Mr. D. Astins – Strategic Development Manager

Mrs. C. Griffiths – Challenge Advisor

Ms. S. Nolan – Group Accountant

Mr. M. Hughes – Democratic Services Officer

Venue: County Hall Chamber, Carmarthen (2:00 – 3:55pm)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND OTHER MATTERS

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors A. James and J. Williams, as well as Mrs. E. Heyes and Mrs. A. Pickles (Parent Governor Members).

2. DECLARATIONS OF PERSONAL INTEREST

| Councillor | Minute Item(s) | Nature of Interest |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|--|
| Councillor D.J.R. Bartlett | Items 6 – 10 | He is President of the Carmarthenshire branch of the National Union of Teachers. |

| Councillor | Minute Item(s) | Nature of Interest |
|--------------------------|----------------|--|
| Councillor C.A. Campbell | Items 6 – 10 | He is currently undertaking consultancy work on behalf of ERW. |
| Councillor M.J.A. Lewis | Items 6 – 10 | She is Vice-President of the Welsh Young Farmers Association. |

3. DECLARATION OF PROHIBITED PARTY WHIPS

There were no declarations of party whips.

4. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

No public questions were received.

5. FORTHCOMING ITEMS

The Committee **UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED** that the items to be considered at the next scheduled meeting on Thursday 26th January 2017, be noted.

6. REVENUE BUDGET STRATEGY CONSULTATION 2017/18 TO 2019/20

Councillor D.J.R. Bartlett had earlier declared an interest in that he is President of the Carmarthenshire branch of the National Union of Teachers.

Councillor C.A. Campbell had earlier declared an interest in that he is currently undertaking consultancy work on behalf of ERW.

Councillor M.J.A. Lewis had earlier declared an interest in that she is Vice-President of the Welsh Young Farmers Association.

The Committee considered the Revenue Budget Strategy 2017/18 to 2019/20 (Appendix A) which had been endorsed by the Executive Board for consultation purposes at its meeting on 21st November 2016. The report provided members with the current proposals for the Revenue Budget for 2017/18 together with indicative figures for the 2018/19 and 2019/20 financial years. The report was based on officers' projections of spending need and took into account the provisional settlement issued by the Welsh Government on 19th October 2016, which was better than had been expected generally within local government and was an improved position on the Authority's original budget outlook plan. Members were informed that the final settlement had been received the previous day and that the Council would be benefiting from an additional net sum of £382,000. However, the additional funding was linked to duties the Authority would be expected to carry out in relation to homelessness.

The Committee was also advised that the budget proposals assumed full delivery of the £24.6m worth of savings identified and a Council Tax increase of 2.5%. A 1% change in the Council Tax would equate to +/-£790,000.

The following issues were discussed during consideration of the report:

Clarification was sought as to the apparent lack of school reserves from March 2018 onwards. Concern was also expressed that schools were utilising their reserves to cover their present day financial predicaments and that the Authority's reserves policy needed to be reviewed. The Director of Corporate Services acknowledged the members' concerns but noted that the report was based on the data that was available or had been supplied by the schools themselves. The fact that there were currently no projected figures for 2018 onwards, was not a true reflection of the likely situation but reflected the position that schools were not able to forecast their balances that far into the future.

Reference was made to departmental overspends and the risk that some £1.8m of the original efficiency proposals for 2016/17 would not be fully delivered in the current financial year. Concern was also expressed at the Education & Children departmental overspend which the Committee had been monitoring throughout the year and it was queried as to why this couldn't be resolved and why was allowed to get to that situation in the first place. The Director of Corporate Services acknowledged the comments but noted that the figures relating to non-delivery of efficiencies referred to the position at the time of writing and that much of this would be resolved by the year end.

Concern was expressed at the proposal to increase charges for school meals, especially as Carmarthenshire had the highest prices in Wales and that for the amount of food that primary school children often ate, the current pricing arrangements were unfair, let alone increasing the charges further. It was proposed that the Executive Board look again at this proposal. The Committee agreed to the proposal but for primary school meals, rather than for secondary schools which operated cafeteria-style facilities where there was a choice of foods.

Concerns were also expressed at the proposal to reduce the core Special Educational Needs (SEN) budget to schools by £70,000 and that such a move would further hamper schools' abilities to support pupils who were already at a disadvantage. It was proposed and endorsed by the Committee that the Executive Board be requested to reconsider this particular proposal. In response, the Interim Director of Education & Children confirmed that the proposal was to reduce the funding given to the 72 larger schools with over a hundred pupils. Provision for these schools would come from their delegated budgets. Schools with less than a hundred pupils sought assistance with SEN provision directly from the Local Authority.

Reference was made to the proposal to reduce the schools delegated budget by £1.9m and serious reservations were expressed that in light of the Welsh Government's cost neutral settlement, this was a purposeful act which would ultimately lead to schools losing their most experienced staff as they attempted to balance their budgets. It was again proposed that the Executive Board reconsider this proposal which the Committee duly endorsed. In response, the Director of Corporate Services reminded the Committee that in opposing proposals such as this, efficiency savings would need to be identified elsewhere in the departmental budget. He also reminded members that schools had been spared substantial cuts in previous

years when compared with the services within the remits of other scrutiny committees (e.g. Highways services).

Disappointment was expressed at the on-going drain on the departmental budget due to costs associated with early voluntary retirement (EVR) arrangements in schools. The Interim Director of Education & Children acknowledged the Committee's concerns but that the matter was difficult for the department to manage as school governors made the decisions in respect of EVR expenditure. However, he reassured the Committee that officers were being proactive in seeking to address budgetary pressures in schools. Arrangements had been put in place to challenge schools on future EVR applications via a new central panel of officers from the department and from Financial Services. The department was also looking to appoint a new officer to work with the TIC Team in the county's schools in order to assist schools with identifying efficiencies in both financial and operational matters. The department had also been undertaking research work in relation to school structures and had found schools with varying numbers of staff and support staff, even though they had similar numbers of pupils. It was hoped that this work would lead to the creation of a Carmarthenshire 'model structure' for schools of different sizes and through this, unifying structures and staffing numbers across the county.

Clarification was sought in relation to the charges for Welsh for Adults courses provided by the department. The Interim Director of Education & Children agreed to confirm whether these charges were per session or hour but added that many would also be supported by grants from other funding sources. The Head of Learner Programmes added that the charges were extremely competitive when compared with other providers and many of the courses were oversubscribed.

The Committee **RESOLVED** that:

6.1 The 3-Year Revenue Budget Consultation 2017/18 to 2019/20 be received.

6.2 The Charging Digest for the Education & Children Department be endorsed.

The Committee **UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED** that:

6.3 The Executive Board be requested to reconsider the proposals to increase school meal charges in the primary sector, to reduce SEN funding and reduce the delegated schools budgets.

7. FIVE YEAR CAPITAL PROGRAMME – 2017/18 TO 2021/22

Councillor D.J.R. Bartlett had earlier declared an interest in that he is President of the Carmarthenshire branch of the National Union of Teachers.

Councillor C.A. Campbell had earlier declared an interest in that he is currently undertaking consultancy work on behalf of ERW.

Councillor M.J.A. Lewis had earlier declared an interest in that she is Vice-President of the Welsh Young Farmers Association.

The Committee considered the Five Year Capital Programme for 2017/18 to 2021/22 (Appendix A) which had been endorsed by the Executive Board for consultation purposes at its meeting on 21st November 2016. It was noted that feedback from

the consultation process, along with the outcome of the final settlement, would inform the final budget report which would be presented to members for consideration in February 2017. The Committee noted that proposed capital programme worth £208m over the 5 years, was aimed at delivering a number of key projects including, to create jobs and improve the quality of life for the people of Carmarthenshire.

The following issues were discussed during consideration of the report:

Clarification was sought as to why Laugharne had been included in the MEP Programme when no decision had been taken in respect of the future of the schools in this area. The Interim Director of Education & Children informed the Committee that it had been included so that re-profiling work could be undertaken, should the proposals for the area's schools go ahead and a new extension be required to accommodate more pupils.

It was noted that Gorslas was now included in the programme with a new school to be built in the near future, even though it was the Committee's view that there were many other schools in dire need of new facilities. Members recalled their visit to Hendy earlier in the year and voiced concern that this school was not included in the programme even though they were of the view that it required a new build. The Interim Director for Education & Children acknowledged the Committee's concerns.

The Committee **UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED** that the 5-Year Capital Programme 2017/18 to 2021/22 be endorsed.

8. EDUCATION & CHILDREN DEPARTMENTAL BUSINESS PLAN 2017-20

Councillor D.J.R. Bartlett had earlier declared an interest in that he is President of the Carmarthenshire branch of the National Union of Teachers.

Councillor C.A. Campbell had earlier declared an interest in that he is currently undertaking consultancy work on behalf of ERW.

Councillor M.J.A. Lewis had earlier declared an interest in that she is Vice-President of the Welsh Young Farmers Association.

The Committee considered the draft Education & Children Departmental Business Plan for 2017-20 which outlined the department's priorities and identified how it would support the 'five ways of working' and goals of the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

The following issues were discussed during consideration of the report:

The Department's willingness to acknowledge challenges and areas for improvement was welcomed. It was also suggested that the department was having to deal with and give attention to so many other societal issues that in turn were side-lining and impacting financially on the traditional and main educational purpose of the department and the County's schools.

The Committee **UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED** that the Business Plan for 2017-20 be endorsed.

9. WELSH IN EDUCATION STRATEGIC PLAN (WESP)

Councillor D.J.R. Bartlett had earlier declared an interest in that he is President of the Carmarthenshire branch of the National Union of Teachers.

Councillor C.A. Campbell had earlier declared an interest in that he is currently undertaking consultancy work on behalf of ERW.

Councillor M.J.A. Lewis had earlier declared an interest in that she is Vice-President of the Welsh Young Farmers Association.

The Committee received for its consideration, the draft Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP) following the public consultation period that ended on the 19th December 2016. The Committee was reminded that in order to comply with the Wales School Standards and Organisation Act (2013), the Authority was required to prepare and submit a Welsh in Education Strategic Plan. As the meeting agenda had been published prior to the end of the consultation period, the Committee received a verbal overview at the meeting outlining the general themes and issues arising from the consultation responses. A total of 20 responses had been received to the consultation.

The following issues were discussed during consideration of the report:

Reference was made to the need to promote the benefits of bilingualism in education and that this was an issue that the Council's Welsh Language Census Working Group had highlighted and subsequently made recommendations upon in its final report. The Head of Learner Programmes acknowledged that this work needed to be continued but reassured members that much work had already been undertaken in conjunction with the Council's Corporate Policy Unit in preparing a promotional campaign which would be rolled out in the new year.

Reference was made to the numbers of pupils who, upon leaving a Welsh-medium primary school, were not continuing along the language continuum in secondary school. Disappointment was expressed at the small numbers of pupils following courses through the medium of Welsh at later key stages and whilst this had been the topic of much debate for many years, the gap had still not been reduced. The Head of Learner Programmes noted that there was provision in each of the 'Outcomes' contained within the draft document to address this and to make it a more natural to transfer from one key stage to the other. There was also a proposal to instigate a forum at regional ERW level to further address the issue.

It was suggested that the benefits of bilingualism to an individual's health should also be included within the Plan and reference was made to the body of international research which indicated that the ability to speak more than one language had been found to offset the effects of Alzheimer's disease for approximately five years, when compared with those who only spoke one language.

It was also suggested that the phrase 'we will continually monitor with partners the demand in our urban areas and expand provision as required' should be changed to 'continually promoting' as the Authority should be promoting the language rather than waiting for a call for support.

In response to the comments about pupils not choosing to remain on the language continuum in secondary education, it was suggested that one of the factors in some areas of the county was that pupils did not have sufficient transport access to the nearest Welsh-medium secondary school and were, due to catchment areas, directed to another school.

The Committee **UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED** to endorse the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan to the Executive Board for its consideration.

10. DRAFT CARMARTHENSHIRE CURRICULUM DECLARATION

Councillor D.J.R. Bartlett had earlier declared an interest in that he is President of the Carmarthenshire branch of the National Union of Teachers.

Councillor C.A. Campbell had earlier declared an interest in that he is currently undertaking consultancy work on behalf of ERW.

Councillor M.J.A. Lewis had earlier declared an interest in that she is Vice-President of the Welsh Young Farmers Association.

The Committee received a presentation outlining the proposed components of local curriculum design and offered the draft high level principles in the form of a draft Carmarthenshire Curriculum Declaration. It was informed that subject to corporate approval, this blueprint would be further developed in a rolling programme between 2017 and 2021, involving school practitioners at every stage of the process.

The following issues were discussed during consideration of the presentation:

Reference was made to the recent member seminar and it was asked whether further sessions would be held in due course. The Head of Learner Programmes confirmed that when further details and guidance emerged from the Welsh Government, more sessions would be held. It was also envisaged that a seminar with local employers would also be held to link the future curriculum with their needs and benefit the county economically.

The proposed flexibility to cater for local needs and promote local history was welcomed and it was asked whether primary schools were currently placing enough emphasis on Welsh history in order to give both local youngsters and those who might have moved to the area, a sense of their roots and history. The Head of Learner Programmes agreed stating that it was important for children and young people to appreciate who they were and instil values in them that would be of benefit in the future. He acknowledged that there were really important and local issues and historical matters that could be included in the curriculum but it was also important not to create inward looking youngsters but foster both an appreciation for Welsh heritage and a desire to contribute as global citizens. He added that local poet Mererid Hopwood had been invited to address ERW's Challenge Advisors on this particular aspect of the new curriculum at a seminar in the new year.

In response to a query on the existing work undertaken by the department to foster and promote the Welsh language and culture, the Interim Director of Education & Children confirmed that much work had already been done in this area and that the County had a number of excellent resources which were used by schools.

Reference was made to the development of a new curriculum in Scotland and the resulting gap between what was taught in schools and the assessment framework. It was asked what measures were being taken to ensure that this did not happen in Wales. The Head of Learner Programmes acknowledged the concern and informed the Committee that a sub-group had already been established by the Welsh Government to investigate this further and ensure that such a problem did not arise in Wales.

The development of a new curriculum was welcomed but it was felt that this was not solely a matter for the Education Department but that all the Council's departments needed to contribute in some way or another as their initiatives and activities also impacted on the communities in which the county's schools operated.

The Committee **UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED** to endorse the Draft Carmarthenshire Curriculum Declaration to the Executive Board for its consideration.

11. EXPLANATION FOR NON-SUBMISSION OF SCRUTINY REPORT

The Committee **UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED** that the explanation for the non-submission of its Task & Finish Group's final report, be noted.

12. TO SIGN AS A CORRECT RECORD THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE COMMITTEE HELD ON THE 10TH OCTOBER 2016

The Chair congratulated Mr. Gareth Morgans on his appointment as Interim Director for Education & Children. The Interim Director briefed the Committee on some changes to the management team within the department which would see existing heads of service and senior managers taking on additional responsibilities. The role of Head of Education Services would also be filled via an internal secondment arrangement and confirmation of this would be shared with members in due course. The School Modernisation Manager's role has been enhanced with additional responsibilities for leading on projects in the Communities Department.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on Monday 10th October 2016, be signed as a correct record.

SIGNED: _____ (Chair)

DATE: _____

