

EDUCATION & CHILDREN SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

TUESDAY, 30TH NOVEMBER, 2021

PRESENT: Councillor D. Price [Chair]

Councillors:

S. Allen, L. Bowen, K. Broom, D. Cundy (In place of G. Jones), R. James, B. Jones, D. Jones, J. Lewis and E. Schiavone

Co-opted Members:

A. Enoch - Parent Governor
F. Healey-Benson - Parent Governor
V. Kenny - Roman Catholic Church Representative

Also in attendance:

Councillor G. Davies – Cabinet Member for Education & Children

The following Officers were in attendance:

G. Morgans – Director of Education & Children’s Services
S. Davies – Head of Access to Education
A. Thomas – Head of Education & Inclusion Services
E. Forsyth – Interim Head of School Improvement, Curriculum & Wellbeing
C. Griffiths – Welsh Language Development Manager
A. Jones - Educational Support Adviser
A. Davies - Principal Educational & Child Psychologist
N. Tilley - Health & Wellbeing Coordinator
M. Evans Thomas - Principal Democratic Services Officer [Note Taker]
M. Davies - Democratic Services Officer
S. Rees - Simultaneous Translator
S. Hendy – Member Support Officer [Webcasting]

Virtual Meeting : 10.00 am - 12.30 pm

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors G. Jones and E. Thomas.

2. DECLARATIONS OF PERSONAL INTEREST INCLUDING ANY PARTY WHIPS ISSUED IN RELATION TO ANY AGENDA ITEM

There were no declarations of personal interest including any party whips.

3. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

The Chair advised that no public questions had been received.

4. WELLBEING: EDUCATION & CHILDREN'S SERVICES DEPARTMENT

The Committee considered a report providing an overview of the extensive ways in

which the Education and Children's Services Department is supporting our schools, pupil referral units and specialist settings with regard to the wellbeing of learners and staff.

The department is continuing to work alongside schools responding to the changing needs of learners, families and staff, as it continues to address the COVID pandemic. The wellbeing challenges faces by schools are increasingly pronounced and complex, adding additional pressures on staffing.

The report detailed:-

- what is known about current staff and pupil wellbeing;
- how the School Improvement Team supports the wellbeing of its staff and learners;
- further support initiatives;
- education and Child Psychology Service and Emotional Health Team;
- corporate and other support available.

The report also included an update on CO₂ monitoring and ventilation in schools and what measures are being undertaken to ensure good ventilation to aid in the prevention of the spread of Covid.

The following questions/observations were raised on the report:-

- In response to a question as to whether there was any identifiable pattern in the data collected, the Committee was informed that there was no pattern as such, however, families from more disadvantaged backgrounds are perhaps facing more challenges. It was important to note that different challenges are arising in different areas as the challenges are changing over time;
- Asked how Peer to Peer Networks work, the Committee was informed that this is a group forum where headteachers come together to share concerns and experiences. Additionally, if any headteacher requires further assistance then that is arranged and there is also signposting to support available from external organisations;
- Concern was expressed at the increase in suicide ideation and attempts and the fact that due to waiting lists it can take up to 3 weeks before a counsellor can be seen and officers were asked if extra safeguards are put in place if the risk is high. Members were reassured that if a significant need is identified at the beginning of counselling then those children are fast-tracked. When any pupil displays concerns, schools are robustly supported immediately by both the education psychologists and safeguarding teams. Direct support is provided both for the young person and their family;
- Officers were asked about the level of increase. The Committee was informed that 58 cases of suicide or suicide ideation were referred for counselling in 2020/21 which was an increase from 38 in the previous year. This was quite a considerable increase but it was also the national picture;
- Reference was made to the significant unprecedented pressure placed upon parents during the pandemic with regard to home schooling and other associated issues and reference was made to the fact that the report did not refer to parental engagement i.e. helping parents to help their children.

The Committee was informed that many schools engaged in the Health & Happiness Programme at the beginning of the pandemic which addressed some issues involved such as routines etc. Also, a pilot Family Engagement Project was currently being undertaken to further extend some of the support offered to families. The Director pointed out that where children are concerned, there is a crossover between Education and Children's Services so Family Support Services contribute to this agenda as well. Many children will be supported by both departments;

- Reference was made to the added pressure placed on headteachers with regard to consultations and it was felt that this was unnecessary at the moment, given the amount of pressure already on staff. The Committee was informed that consultation on strategies e.g. the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan is a statutory requirement and the Authority is obligated to consult and report back to the WG by the end of January;
- With regard to our special schools, officers were asked if they succeeded to keep in close contact with Social Services, physiotherapy and other agencies during the pandemic. Also, did these children have more open air teaching experiences? The Committee was informed that, in line with all the risk assessments, multi-agency working has continued for all learners within all our specialist settings. The leaders have been really creative in their thinking to ensure that learners are accessing the range of learning and support that they need. Regular communication with families to make sure that even during blended learning times, when learners were not able to be in class, rigorous support was in place. Even in the most challenging of situations leaders have been very innovative in the way they have dealt with the most vulnerable learners to ensure that that provision does continue. We heavily endorse outdoor learning for all our learners and some of the projects introduced focussed on getting learners outside, even whilst learning from home, by engaging with parents;
- Concern was expressed over the amount of pressure being placed on headteachers throughout the pandemic and now with the new variant and more pressure and responsibility being placed on headteachers, officers were asked if they were satisfied that adequate support was being provided with regard to transmission of the disease and health and safety. The Director informed the Committee that officers are well aware of the challenges headteachers are facing, via regular contact. Officers produced a Risk Assessment using a corporate template and assistance was provided with completing these. The Health & Safety team have also been in regular contact with schools. He pointed out that it was important to remember the health and wellbeing of officers who have been working non stop throughout the pandemic, being constantly on-call. The cohort of headteachers and officers have worked very well together; it has been a team effort which has worked and continues to work effectively;
- Reference was made to school closure proposals and officers were asked if any support is provided for children in this regard. The Committee was informed that a myriad of different anxieties are being displayed by children at the moment because of how much the world has changed. Officers are robust in supporting schools with any concerns being displayed whether it be in relation to a change in education provision within the area, climate change etc. Staff are considering the wellbeing of children from many different angles and this intelligence is fed through to officers so that they can cater the support accordingly and lessen the pressure;

- Reference was made to staffing problems being experienced in schools in that there are not enough staff available to prepare food at lunchtime. The Committee was informed that there have been staffing challenges throughout the pandemic mainly due to staff awaiting PCR results etc. Some work is being done around supply staff, the issue has been raised with the WG and some work is being done with Supply Agencies in an attempt to increase the bank of supply staff;
- Concern was expressed with regard to areas of poor ventilation in some schools where CO₂ readings are consistently amber or red and officers were asked how many schools are affected. The Committee was informed that monitors have been distributed to schools and they have been asked to identify rooms which are consistently amber or red. As soon as those results are received officers will consult with colleagues in Property Services to try and address the poor ventilation in those areas with portable ventilation systems or whatever is needed;
- Members noted the tremendous amount of support available to pupils, teachers and headteachers.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED

4.1 that the report be received;

4.2 that the Committee receive regular updates on the situation regarding ventilation in our schools.

5. EDUCATION DEPARTMENT'S 10 YEAR STRATEGY

The Committee considered the Education & Children's Services Department's 10 Year Strategy which brought together the department's strategic thinking, collective vision, mission statements and priorities over the next 10 years. The department's new proposed vision was "*Making sure every child and young person is valued and valued equally*".

The strategy builds on the improving practice which was already evident within the education service, in order to deliver the same opportunity for all learners with consistently excellent outcomes. It sets out a clear, shared vision for the role that education services plays in the future development of vibrant communities and a prosperous economy in Carmarthenshire. This high-level strategy will be operationalised through departmental and divisional plans and will also be evident in School Development Plans.

The Committee was asked to consider and comment upon the following issues and to formulate views thereon for submission to the Cabinet for consideration:-

1. Does the Strategy meet the aims as noted in the report?
2. Are the 20 Purpose Pieces relevant and do they reflect the County Council's aspirations?
3. Can the Strategy be improved in any way?

The following questions/observations were raised on the report:-

- Asked how officers consulted with schools on the strategy, the Committee was informed that consultation was undertaken on two levels – three

workshops were held with headteachers and consultation was also undertaken with secondary school councils;

- Reference was made to the fact that over the next 10 years a significant cohort of children who have been affected by the pandemic will pass through the school system and the need to ensure that no children slip through the system was stressed. The Director explained that Aspirations 2,4 and 5 within the strategy have been specifically written with that in mind. Many of these high level aspirations have been written bearing in mind that we will be dealing with the repercussions of the pandemic for a long time;
- Reference was made to the fact that the availability of staff with relevant experience and bilingual skills continues to be a challenge for the Authority. With regard to the 10 Year Strategy and the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan, officers were asked how the Authority is going to address these issues i.e. how will we recruit all the staff with necessary language skills and how will we retain those staff. The Director explained that beneath these strategies sit the departmental business plans which contain the details in relation to how we support the strategies. Lots of staff have engaged in online learning during the pandemic and teaching still remains an attractive occupation with a high number currently undertaking teacher training;
- Asked how the strategy will be linked to measurements which can be monitored such as KPIs and timescales, the Director explained that officers are currently in discussion regarding the best way to measure progress on the 20 high level aspirations;
- With regard to aspiration 3, reference was made to the fact that we need to ensure that children have the right skills to succeed in particular entrepreneurship and innovation. With regard to aspiration 18, the importance of the role of parents and carers was stressed as it was felt that schools need supportive parents and parents need supportive schools;
- If WG is serious about reaching 1m Welsh speakers then the next 10 years are going to be instrumental in that, officers were asked if there will be specific targets in place in relation to the number of children being taught in Welsh streams etc. The Director explained that the WG has set targets for each Local Authority and for Carmarthen the target is that 68%-74% of children in Year 1 will be taught through the medium of Welsh by the end of the WESP. The figure is currently 58% and we have to respond to that challenge.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED

- 5.1 that the report be received;**
- 5.2 that reference to parents and carers be included in Aspiration 18 within the strategy;**
- 5.3 that the observations made above be relayed to the Cabinet for consideration.**

6. FUTURE ARRANGEMENTS FOR SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT SESSIONS

The Committee considered a report outlining proposed arrangements for future engagement with schools during current limitations. School visits were previously undertaken by the Committee, however, the limitations meant that visits were not possible and officers had therefore provided a new structure, in the form of school engagement sessions, which would allow scrutiny to ensure that evaluation and improvement is functioning effectively.

The proposed school engagement sessions will help the Scrutiny Committee to oversee the quality of delivery by the Local Authority and in doing so, fulfil its democratic accountability functions. They will also provide the Scrutiny Committee with an insight into how schools are preparing for significant changes in areas such as the new curriculum and Additional Learning Needs.

Direct and first-hand engagement with schools will provide valuable opportunities for members to better understand the impact that the Local Authority's support has on provision across our school system.

The focus of school engagement sessions should be on the quality and impact of governance and accountability arrangements with regard to schools and the effectiveness of the Local Authority to support schools and learners which should include evaluating the effectiveness of democratic accountability arrangements in supporting schools.

The engagement sessions would take the form of physical visits to schools (when allowed again), virtual/remote meetings or requesting schools to attend meetings in the council chamber (when possible).

Suggested key themes for the remainder of the academic year 2021/22 and for the Autumn term 2022/23 were as follows:-

	Theme	Approach
January 2022	Recovery from covid and wellbeing of staff	Remotely
Spring 2022	Preparedness for ALN transformation	Currently remotely
Summer 2022	Preparedness for Curriculum and WESP	Currently remotely
Autumn 2022	MEP – buildings	School visits

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED

- 6.1 that the report be noted;
- 6.2 that school engagement sessions be arranged as detailed in the report.

7. FORTHCOMING ITEMS

The Committee considered a list of items to be considered at the next scheduled meeting of the Committee to be held on 23rd December, 2021.

As the budget consultation report has been moved to the January meeting, leaving only one report for consideration at the next meeting, it was requested that the “Teams Around The Family” report scheduled to be submitted to the January meeting be brought forward to the December meeting. The Director suggested that the report be titled “Support for Families” which would allow for a far wider scope.

RESOLVED that the list of forthcoming items to be considered at the next meeting, with the inclusion of the above-mentioned amendment, be noted.

8. **TO SIGN AS A CORRECT RECORD THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE COMMITTEE HELD ON THE 8TH JULY, 2021.**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 8th July, 2021 be signed as a correct record.

CHAIR

DATE