

EDUCATION, YOUNG PEOPLE & THE WELSH LANGUAGE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY, 31 JANUARY 2024

PRESENT: Councillor A.C. Jones (Chair)

Councillors (In Person):

L. Davies	P. Hughes-Griffiths	D. Jones	H. Jones
M.J.A. Lewis	E. Skinner		

Councillors (Virtually):

S.M. Allen	K.V. Broom	B.W. Jones	S.L. Rees
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Co-opted Members (In Person):

A. Butcher, Parent Governor
A. Enoch, Parent Governor
V. Kenny, Roman Catholic Church Representative

The following Cabinet Members were in attendance (In Person):

G. Davies
A. Lenny

Also Present (In Person):

G. Morgans, Director of Education & Children's Services
S. Davies, Head of Access to Education
A. Rees, Head of Strategy and Learner Support
A Thomas, Head of Education Services and Inclusion
J. Coles, Head of Children and Families
R. Hemingway, Head of Financial Services
L. Grice, Childcare & Play Sufficiency Manager
S. Nolan, Group Accountant
D. Hall-Jones, Member Support Officer
J. Owens, Democratic Services Officer

Also Present (Virtually):

L. Davies, Simultaneous Translator

Chamber - County Hall, Carmarthen. SA31 1JP and remotely - 10.00 am - 12.18 pm

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors L.R. Bowen and M. Thomas.

Note: These minutes are subject to confirmation at the next meeting.

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

Councillor / Officer	Minute Number	Nature of Interest
Cllr. B. W. Jones	4. Revenue Budget Strategy Consultation 2024/25 to 2026/27	Son is Headteacher of a school within Carmarthenshire. Cllr Jones has been granted dispensation by the Standards Committee allowing her to speak and make representations only.
Cllr M.J.A. Lewis	4. Revenue Budget Strategy Consultation 2024/25 to 2026/27	Niece works in the education department.
Cllr. E. Skinner	4. Revenue Budget Strategy Consultation 2024/25 to 2026/27	Niece is a teacher within the County.
Cllr. B. W. Jones	6. Draft Divisional Service Delivery Plans 2024-25	Son is Headteacher of a school within Carmarthenshire. Cllr Jones has been granted dispensation by the Standards Committee allowing her to speak and make representations only.

There were no declarations of prohibited party whips.

3. PUBLIC QUESTIONS (NONE RECEIVED)

The Chair advised that no public questions had been received.

4. REVENUE BUDGET STRATEGY CONSULTATION 2024/25 TO 2026/27

[NOTE: Councillors B.W. Jones, M.J.A. Lewis and E. Skinner, having earlier declared an interest in this item remained in the meeting during its consideration.]

The Committee considered a report on the Council's Revenue Budget Strategy 2024/25 to 2026/27 and which provided Members with the current view of the

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revenue budget for 2024/2025, together with indicative figures for the 2025/2026 and 2026/2027 financial years. The report was based on officers' projections of spending requirements and took account of the provisional settlement issued by Welsh Government (WG) on 20th December 2023.

It was reported that whilst significant work had already been undertaken in preparing the budget, the report represented an initial position statement which would be updated following the consultation process. Accordingly, Members were reminded that the report had been considered by the Cabinet at its meeting on 15 January 2024 and members of the Committee had attended recent consultation events which had provided an opportunity to analyse and seek clarification on various aspects of the budget.

The Committee was informed that the announced provisional settlement represented an average increase of 3.1% across Wales on the 2023/24 settlement, with Carmarthenshire's increase being 3.3% (£11.0m). While the settlement was marginally above the Council's planning figure of a 3.0% increase and provided £0.9m more than the Council's original assumption, and was to be welcomed, the inflationary, pay awards and other service pressure increases far exceeded the funding provided. In context, the additional budgets required in 2024/25 to meet the costs of pay awards alone totalled £15m. In particular, no additional funding had been provided to meet the inherent budget shortfall going forward as a result of either the uplift in Teachers pay set by Welsh Government, nor the 2023 NJC pay award set by national pay bargaining.

Committee's attention was drawn to section 3.5 of the budget strategy whereby an overview of the schools' delegated budgets was provided to Members. The Cabinet Member for Resources explained that the budget proposals included a £3.5m saving applied in this regard, which was consistent with the level of savings required of other areas of council services. The Cabinet Member for Resources was however pleased to report that the planned reduction to the Recruit Recover Retain Standards (RRRS) grant had been reversed, which would provide partial mitigation.

An overview of the updated position on the current financial outlook, as set out at section 4 of the report, was provided to the Committee which took account of the provisional settlement and also other recent validation changes.

The Committee thereupon considered the following detailed budget information appended to the Strategy, relevant to its remit:-

- **Appendix A(i)** – Efficiency summary for the Education & Children's Services Department.
- **Appendix A(ii)** – Growth Pressures summary for the Education & Children's Services Department.
- **Appendix B** – Budget monitoring report for the Education & Children's Services Department
- **Appendix C** – Charging Digest for the Education & Children's Services Department

Note: These minutes are subject to confirmation at the next meeting.

The Cabinet Member for Resources advised that Welsh Government was to receive an extra £25m funding for public services through the Barnett Formula following the boost received by English councils aimed to tackle their cash crisis. It was hoped that some of this additional funding would be distributed to Local Authorities.

In closing, the Committee was advised that the final budget proposals would be presented to County Council on the 28 February 2024, one day following the finalisation of Welsh Government's budget.

The issues/observations raised by the Committee were addressed as follows:-

Concerns were raised that the mechanism for funding the Teachers' and Firefighters' pension increases had not yet been worked through between Westminster and Welsh Government. The Head of Financial Services reported that while it was assumed that this matter would have a nil impact on the Authority's funding position given the aspiration to resolve the matter within the current financial year, it did, nevertheless, represent a significant financial risk to the Authority until such time as formal confirmation was received. Furthermore, should confirmation be received at national level, a risk remained in respect of the distribution of funding amongst Local Authorities.

In response to a query regarding the Youth Support Service & Participation, it was confirmed that as a non-statutory provision, the proposals comprised a 10% reduction to operational costs and a reduction in core funding over a 3 year period until such time as the provision would be reliant on grant funding. The Director of Education and Children's Services recognised the potential long term adverse impact upon children and young people and emphasised that the proposals were based upon the requirement to meet efficiency savings.

The Director of Education and Children's Services, in response to a query, clarified that the transfer of responsibility and funding for the school breakfast provision to schools would lead to a more effective and efficient service, with opportunities for schools to generate income. A consultation exercise was scheduled to commence imminently.

Reference was made to the efficiencies required within the delegated schools budget whereby a concern was raised that the impact of the level of reduction per learner would be felt greater within smaller schools. An assurance was provided to the Committee that discussions were ongoing in an effort to mitigate the severity of the impact on smaller schools; it was however highlighted that any mitigation in this regard would result a greater impact on larger schools.

Reference was made to the proposed review of primary schools' footprint to derive efficiency savings of £200k for 2025/26 whereby a Member enquired as to the potential number of school closures that would be required to achieve the efficiency savings. It was explained that a thorough review of all Carmarthenshire schools was ongoing, however the closure of smaller schools would only derive savings in terms of site costs which was estimated to be in the region of £50k-60k per school.

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Following a request for further information regarding the schools which showed a deficit budgetary position, the Director of Education and Children's Services confirmed that 4 secondary schools and 32 primary schools were currently showing a deficit. It was anticipated that the number of budgetary deficits would be increased in 2024/25 which further highlighted the need for schools to collaborate to identify potential sharing of resources.

In response to concerns raised, the Head of Strategy and Learner Support provided an overview of the detrimental impact that would be incurred as a result of further reductions to the Welsh Language Support and Data & Education Systems budgets. It was acknowledged by Members that staffing cuts to these areas would lead to a reduced service provision and pose a risk in terms of the Authority's ability to deliver the requirements of the Welsh In Education Strategic Plan and accordingly, grant funding opportunities were being explored.

In considering the savings proposals reference was made to a recent televised programme which related to schools in urgent need of repair, and which included one school within the county. An assurance was therefore sought that the proposed budgetary cuts would not impact upon the timescales for the delivery of repairs to be carried out in schools to ensure a safe and positive learning environment for pupils. The Head of Access to Education duly clarified that the school in question related to a design issue rather than an issue of neglect of maintenance and the Authority was monitoring the situation and exploring ways for the issue to be addressed on a longer-term basis. It was acknowledged that the budget provision did not meet all costs incurred by some schools in respect of repair and maintenance of buildings, however an assurance was provided that repairs and maintenance were prioritised according to health and safety requirements within the budget available.

The Committee expressed concern and dissatisfaction that the cumulative deficit balances in future years remained a significant risk to the Authority, however there was little room for manoeuvre in light of the funding allocation from Welsh Government. In particular, the nationally agreed teachers' pay uplift, which had not been funded by Government, placed a significant additional pressure on Local Authorities and would result in consequential implications for school budgets, which are already extremely tight. In light of the aforementioned concerns, the Committee felt that written representations should be conveyed to the Welsh Government and / or HM Treasury as part of its consultation process on the Spring Budget 2024.

RESOLVED that:

- 4.1 The 2024/25 – 2026/27 Revenue Budget Strategy Consultation be received;**
- 4.2 The Charging Digest detailed in Appendix C to the report be endorsed;**
- 4.3 The Chair to submit written representations to Welsh Government and / or HM Treasury to express the Committee's concern and dissatisfaction in respect of the proposed budget**

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allocation for schools and teachers pay awards.

5. UPDATE ON CHILDCARE OFFER FOR WALES

The Committee received for consideration an update report on the Childcare Offer for Wales, the aim of which was to support families with the provision of high quality, flexible and affordable childcare to promote economic regeneration, reduce pressures on family income and help parents to participate in work, thereby reducing a family's risk of poverty. Furthermore, the scheme, introduced in January 2019, was funded by Welsh Government for eligible parents and sought to enhance the wellbeing of children with the provision of positive and rich childcare experiences.

A synopsis of the delivery of the scheme was provided to the Committee, which included the introduction of a National Childcare Offer digital service in Summer 2022 to provide a streamlined and uniformed registration and application process, and a weekly fast payment claims service for providers.

The report set out statistics for the number of applications approved and detailed the support available for additional learning needs by way of the Additional Support Grant (ASG) provided by Welsh Government.

Committee reviewed the payments made to Carmarthenshire Childcare Providers which represented a considerable saving for many local working families and helped to sustain local childcare providers, particularly during the coronavirus pandemic.

The issues/observations raised by the Committee were addressed as follows:-

The Director of Education and Children's Services, in response to a query, explained that given the eligibility criteria, it would be difficult to extract accurate figures pertaining to the number of parents/guardians that had not applied to the childcare offer. Committee was however assured to note that the department utilised a robust marketing and communications strategy to promote the scheme in a consistent manner and in accordance with its aims and objectives.

Following a query, it was considered that the eligibility criteria in respect of the minimum number of hours worked was considered to be one of the main the barriers to access the scheme. It was however highlighted that Welsh Government, in recent years, had extended its eligibility criteria to include those in higher education, seasonal workers and parents of adopted children.

In response to comments made by a Member, it was reported that whilst Welsh Government had confirmed that it would not be reviewing the payment rate for another year, the Authority was monitoring the situation closely following concerns raised that the rate of payment was not sustainable for some providers, thereby requiring some parents to make top up payments.

It was queried whether the distribution of providers across Carmarthenshire resulted in parents/guardians having to utilise childcare provision outside the local area, thereby having a consequential impact on the choice of schools selected. The Early Years and Childcare Manager reported that a gap analysis

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of the childcare provision across the county was undertaken every 5 years and had identified a reduction in the number of childminders based in rural areas since the coronavirus pandemic. Whilst it was acknowledged that the lack of childcare provision within certain localities could potentially influence the choice of schools selected by parents/guardians it was also recognised that an array of circumstances could be attributable to the schools selected.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the report be received.

6. DRAFT DIVISIONAL SERVICE DELIVERY PLANS 2024-25

[NOTE: Councillor B.W. Jones, having earlier declared an interest in this item remained in the meeting during its consideration].

The Committee received for consideration the Draft Divisional Service Delivery Plans relevant to the Education and Children's Services directorate for 2024/25 as follows:

- Access to Education
- Children's Services
- Education and Inclusion Services
- Strategy & Learner Support

The Draft Divisional Service Delivery Plans set out the strategic actions and measures to be implemented within each Division in order for the Council to progress with its well-being objectives, thematic priorities and service priorities.

In terms of the Children's Services Service Delivery Plan the report detailed that the elements relevant to the Education, Young People and Wels Language Scrutiny Committee related to the following areas:

- Schools Safeguarding and Attendance
- Educational Psychology
- Play Sufficiency Assessment

The Head of Access to Education clarified that the convergence of the coronavirus pandemic, Brexit and the Ukraine War had contributed to a significant increase in construction costs, which has hindered the delivery of projects related to the Modernising Education Programme.

In response to a query the Head of Access to Education provided an update on the roll out of the Universal Free School Meals provision which was expected to be concluded in February 2024. In this regard, the Head of Access to Education paid tribute to the Catering team and other departments within the Authority who had assisted with the delivery of the provision.

It was further reported that whilst Welsh Government had increased the Universal Free School Meal value from £2.90 to £3.20, the amount did not reflect the true cost to the Authority for the provision of high quality, nutritious school meals to all primary schools. The Director of Education and Children's Services stated that

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discussions were ongoing with Welsh Government in an endeavour for bespoke financing levels to be applied across different counties given the additional costs incurred by rural areas. In support of Officers' endeavours, a Member requested that the Committee's sentiments in respect of the Free School Meal funding formula be conveyed to the Welsh Government as part of any written representations made in respect of the budget (minute 4 above refers).

The Head of Children and Families Services, in response to a request, provided an overview of the sponsored placements on the Open University Social Work Degree/ Masters Degree programme, the aim of which was to mitigate against the national shortage of social workers. Committee welcomed the array of opportunities available to both current employees and new entrants to become qualified social workers within the county.

In response to a query, the Head of Education Services and Inclusion appraised Members of the current situation in relation to supporting improved behaviour across the county's schools. The national issue surrounding declined standards of behaviour had become more prevalent following the coronavirus pandemic, which had been further compounded by the backlog neurological conditions being diagnosed by the health service. Members were assured to note that a clear strategy was in place to manage behaviour within schools which utilised the Team Teach behaviour management approach and which endorsed early intervention as a key component.

The Head of Strategy and Learner Support provided a synopsis of the role of the Outdoor Education Advisor to ensure the safety and protection of young people attending outdoor activities.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that:

- 6.1 The Draft Divisional Service Delivery Plans relevant to the Education and Children's Services directorate for 2024/25 be endorsed;**
- 6.2 The Committee's sentiments referred to above in respect of the Free School Meal funding formula be conveyed to the Welsh Government as part of any written representations made in respect of the budget [minute 4 above refers].**

7. EXPLANATION FOR NON-SUBMISSION OF SCRUTINY REPORT

The Committee received an explanation for the non-submission of the scrutiny report pertaining to the 10 year Social Services Strategy.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the explanation for the non-submission be noted.

8. FORTHCOMING ITEMS

Note: These minutes are subject to confirmation at the next meeting.

The Committee reviewed the list of forthcoming items to be considered at its next meeting to be held on 03 April 2024, which had been derived from the Committee's Forward Work Plan. The Chair emphasised that the Forward Work Plan was a flexible document that could be updated as required throughout the year as new information emerges.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the list of forthcoming items to be considered at the next scheduled meeting on the 3rd April 2024 be noted.

9. TO SIGN AS A CORRECT RECORD THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE COMMITTEE HELD ON THE 1ST DECEMBER 2023

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 1st December 2023 be signed as a correct record.

CHAIR

DATE

Note: These minutes are subject to confirmation at the next meeting.