

# EDUCATION & CHILDREN SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Friday, 28 January 2022

**PRESENT:** Councillor D. Price (Chair)

## **Councillors:**

E.G. Thomas, S.M. Allen, L.R. Bowen, K.V. Broom, J.S. Edmunds (in place of S. Davies), J.P. Jenkins, B.W. Jones, D. Jones, G.R. Jones, M.J.A. Lewis, K. Lloyd (in place of R. James), E.M.J.G. Schiavone, D.T. Williams

## **Co-opted Members:**

A. Enoch - Parent Governor  
F. Healey-Benson - Parent Governor  
V. Kenny - Roman Catholic Church Representative  
Rev. D Richards - Church in Wales Representative

## **Also in attendance:**

Councillor G. Davies, Cabinet Member for Education & Children  
Councillor D.M. Jenkins, Cabinet Member for Resources

## **School Representatives for Bryngwyn and Glan y Môr Federation Comprehensive Schools:**

Mr P. Jones - Headteacher, Ysgol Bryngwyn & Ysgol Glan y Môr Federation  
Mr J. Jones - Head of School, Ysgol Glan y Môr  
Mrs A. Bevan - Assistant Headteacher, Ysgol Bryngwyn

## **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 Services and Inclusion  
S. Smith, Head of Children's Services  
E. Forsyth, Interim Head of School Improvement, Curriculum and Wellbeing  
R. Hemingway, Head of Financial Services  
S. Nolan, Group Accountant  
A. Eynon, Principal Translator  
M. Evans Thomas, Principal Democratic Services Officer  
E. Evans, Principal Democratic Services Officer [Webcasting]  
E. Bryer, Democratic Services Officer  
J. Owens, Democratic Services Officer [Note Taker]

## **Virtual Meeting - 2.00 - 4.02 pm**

### **1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors S. Davies and R. James.

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

Councillor	Minute No (s)	Nature of Interest
Dot Jones	4. School Engagement	Son is a pupil at Bryngwyn comprehensive school

There were no declarations of any prohibited party whips.

## 3. PUBLIC QUESTIONS (NONE RECEIVED)

The Chair advised that no public questions had been received.

## 4. SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

[NOTE: Cllr. D. Jones having earlier declared an interest in this item remained in the meeting for its consideration].

In accordance with the School Engagement Programme agreed by Committee at its meeting on 30<sup>th</sup> November 2021, a report was presented to Members which focussed upon the process of recovery as schools emerged from the Covid-19 pandemic.

It was explained to Members that that an alternative structure, in the form of online school engagement sessions, had been introduced to temporarily replace school visits during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, and which would enable the Committee to continue with its school evaluation and improvement function.

The Committee considered the financial support allocated to schools during 2021/22 by way of the Accelerated Learning Programme and which included an additional 'Recruit, Recover, Raise Standards' (RRRs) grant recently provided. The Committee's remit was to focus upon the utilisation of the additional funding provided to schools to meet the needs of the requirements of the RRRs, within the areas of Accelerated Learning, Priority Cohorts for Support and Curriculum Reform.

The Committee then received a presentation from the school representatives which focussed upon the means by which they had addressed the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, the impact upon pupils and staff and the perceived longer-term challenges ahead. An overview of how the schools had utilised the additional funding received provided members with a detailed understanding of the impact of the Local Authority's support on provision across the school system. Key points covered within the presentation included:

- A culture of excellence was at the heart of the federated schools, which enabled a rapid development of new norms and priorities, with communication and wellbeing central to the school's revised strategy.

- A number of adjustments were made within the federated schools in the national effort against coronavirus, including the establishment and monitoring of contact groups, Lateral Flow Testing, Risk Assessments and the introduction of two new assessment systems. Physical mitigations included the introduction of hand sanitisers, face coverings, one-way systems, designated entry points and ‘bubble’ learning zones.
- The grant funding enabled the federated schools to support pupils in ways which could not otherwise have been provided, including the introduction of parent engagement roles, increased capacity of core subjects and enhanced ICT provision (in terms of both equipment and skills) to assist with the transition to virtual and blended learning.
- A number of unexpected positive outcomes had been derived from the Covid-19 pandemic, termed by the federated schools as “Covid keepers”; these comprised:
  - Enhanced relationships with parents by way of regular communication facilitated by the use of technology.
  - Blended learning being viewed as the new status quo, enabling flexible learning.
  - Sharing of best practice, including exploration of new ICT platforms and approaches. A playlist by the federated schools had recently been published on HWB as part of the Welsh Government national resource case study to promote best practice and facilitate self-evaluation and improvement. It was agreed that the playlist be circulated to Committee.
  - Social benefits, including wellbeing walks to further strengthen social cohesion amongst pupils in year groups.
- Reference was also made to recent challenges imposed by ‘Storm Barra’ in December 2021, which had caused significant damage to the Bryngwyn school building roof and had resulted in the closure of the school whilst repairs were underway. Nevertheless, the Committee was pleased to note that there had been no disruption to the learning of pupils due to the seamless transition to online learning and relocation of pupils in accordance with the school’s business continuity arrangements.

A number of observations and queries were addressed, as follows:

In response to a query regarding the issue of ‘lost learning’ and the introduction of the Centre Assessed Grading system, the Committee was informed that the additional resources provided by the RRRS grant funding enabled the school to respond appropriately by way of enhanced ICT and technical support to bridge gap between the school and communities, Parental Engagement Officers to support families with learning and the use of mentoring programmes and smaller group work to provide appropriate intervention into areas of need. Furthermore, the additional grant funding was utilised to temporarily enhance the budget to address staff resource issues and sufficient capacity for continuity of learning.

Concerns were expressed that some pupils were not equipped for formal examinations, and furthermore that they had not attained the expected standard of learning as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The school representatives advised that appropriate support was provided to ensure a positive experience for all pupils, within the parameters of national determinations. Data was also being collated by the schools to ensure the provision of accurate pupil grading in the event of any adjustments made to the assessment arrangements. Furthermore, it was highlighted to members that whilst not all pupils had reached the expected standard of learning within the core subjects, the Covid-19 pandemic had enhanced skills in areas such as resilience, independence and creativity.

Reference was made to the Estonian education system who had pioneered 'e-school bags' to promote digital inclusivity. The Director of Education and Children's Services noted that the Estonian education digital solutions would be further explored, however assurances were provided that a wide range of digital learning resources was already available to pupils via the HWB platform. The Head of Education Services and Inclusion further advised that a longer-term digital strategy would require a review of government funding arrangements to provide appropriate resources to schools and pupils. The Committee was also advised that areas of best practice was a key focus area for Carmarthenshire schools, demonstrated by the array of established forums such as the School Learning Organisation Networks, Secondary Focus Networks, Secondary Primary Networks, in addition to the ongoing collaboration between Education Support Advisors and regular Headteacher meetings.

Following an enquiry regarding the feasibility and flexibility of a longer-term blended learning provision post Covid-19, the school representatives assured the Committee that all opportunities were being explored to enhance learning experiences and provide greater flexibility of learning in conjunction with the imminent introduction of the new curriculum for secondary schools. In this regard, Officers referred to the alternative learning models being trialled for older pupils to promote independent learners and prepare pupils for higher education. It was however explained that further collaboration between schools was required to ensure the correct use of technology to reach its full potential. The Committee was also assured to note that blended learning would be utilised as a tool to support learning and was not intended to replace human contact.

The Committee commended the schools for the sterling efforts made in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and expressed their gratitude to the representatives for the informative and valuable presentation. Members suggested that pupils could form part of future engagement sessions to articulate their experiences directly to the Committee. This was agreed.

**UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the report be received.**

## **5. REVENUE BUDGET STRATEGY CONSULTATION 2022/23 to 2024/25**

The Committee considered the Council's Revenue Budget Strategy 2022/23 to 2024/25 which provided a current view of the revenue budget for 2021/2022 together with indicative figures for the 2023/24 and 2024/25 financial years.

The report provided details of the budget process, the current Welsh Government provisional settlement issued on 21<sup>st</sup> December 2021 and the final settlement timetable and identified the validation and budget pressures that needed to be considered by Members in setting next year's revenue budget.

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 the 17<sup>th</sup> January 2022 and members of the Committee had recently attended consultation events which had provided an opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification on various aspects of the budget.

The report indicated that, after adjustments for WG, identified transfers, the increase in the provisional settlement for Carmarthenshire was 9.2% (£26.335 million). The Aggregate External Finance (AEF) had therefore increased to £311.957 million in 2022/23 which accommodated teachers' pay and included £302k in respect of the Social Care Workforce Grant.

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. Whilst concerns were raised that many service specific grants remained at a similar level to previous years given the impact of pay awards and general inflation, it was reported to Members that for 2022/23, the RRRS grant would continue, and that the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) grant and Pupil Development grant would be enhanced

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

It was reported that the final settlement was due to be received from Welsh Government on the 1<sup>st</sup> March, 2022 and any amendments required to be considered in relation to the Budget Strategy arising from that announcement would also be considered by Council at its meeting scheduled for 2<sup>nd</sup> March, 2022.

Officers addressed a number of member queries and observations, as follows:

In response to a query regarding the take-up of the Hardship fund by Schools, Officers duly clarified the parameters in which schools could apply for the funding. It was explained to Members that common costs would usually be met from corporate departmental budgets. Furthermore, it was emphasised that individual school circumstances, in terms of the scale of impact from the Covid-19 pandemic in areas such as staffing, varied throughout the county. The Committee was

assured to note that regular communication was provided to all schools to ensure all schools were aware of the funding available and encouraged to apply in accordance with eligibility criteria.

Committee referred to the provision of air purifiers for schools and queried the level of funding available to the Council. The Head of Access to Education clarified that funding in the region of £134k had been received to deal with ventilation and data was currently being collated to determine school requirements in this regard. Members were informed that a total of 36 air purifying units had been procured and allocated to date, which was sufficient to meet the current level of demand. It was however noted that the funding allocation for the longer-term solution would likely need to be enhanced to enable schools with identified ventilation issues to be retrofitted with appropriate filters. The Cabinet Member for Education referred to the Notice of Motion considered at a meeting of the Cabinet held on 17<sup>th</sup> January 2022 and reported that a response was awaited from the Minister to confirm the advice from the Technical Advisory Group and the WG progress in terms of the procurement and funding of Ultra Violet and/or High Efficiency Particulate Air Filters in schools.

In response to a query, the Cabinet Member for Resources reported that the Minister's letter which accompanied the settlement was explicit that Welsh Government expects Council to meet the cost of any future pay awards from the improved settlement and confirmed that the 4% teacher pay awards for 2022/23 was reflected within the delegated budget.

Concerns were expressed regarding the reduction in the number of schools for 2024/25. It was clarified that a review of the Modernising Education Programme (MEP) was currently underway, following which the matter would be further considered.

The Committee commended the Director of Corporate Services and his team for the development of a budget against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic and unprecedented circumstances, to ensure an appropriate provision of services for Carmarthenshire.

**RESOLVED that:**

**5.1 The 2022/23 – 2024/25 Revenue Budget Strategy Consultation be received;**

**5.2 The Charging Digest detailed in Appendix C to the report, be endorsed.**

**6. EDUCATION & CHILDREN DRAFT DEPARTMENTAL BUSINESS PLAN 2022 - 2023**

Members were provided with an overview of the draft business plan for the Education and Children section which aimed to support the delivery of the Corporate Strategy. The Committee considered the departmental priorities for 2022-23 in relation to the following areas falling within its remit:

- Access to Education
- Children's Services
- Curriculum and Wellbeing
- Education and Inclusion Services

Reference was made to the effective practices and new methodologies which had been developed under Covid-19 restrictions; whereby it was acknowledged that many approaches and initiatives would form part of future working practices.

A number of observations and queries were addressed, as follows:

In response to a query, the Director of Education and Children's Services confirmed to Members that the Task and Finish Group Report 208/19, which incorporated recommendations emanating from the review of Carmarthenshire's School Admissions Policy, was scheduled to be considered by the Cabinet at its meeting on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2022. The Committee noted that the business plan would be duly updated to reflect the determinations of the Cabinet.

Committee referred to the funding formula for ALN and requested an update in this regard. The Head of Education Services and Inclusion explained that a clear direction had been agreed amongst secondary schools, however, due to the variances in size amongst primary schools, it was resolved that additional funding would be allocated on a priority basis as part of the growth expenditure. It was explained that the general funding formula had been reviewed to address the pressures identified by schools. Following an imminent consultation period, it was envisaged that the revised funding formula would be implemented from March 2022.

Concerns were raised that feedback had been received from a school who had experienced difficulties in contacting the Council to report and rectify maintenance issues. Committee was provided with an explanation of the process to be followed in this regard and assurances provided that a simple one-page procedure was currently being developed for schools.

An update was requested in respect of music services. The Interim Head of School Effectiveness explained that blended opportunities had been provided to schools during the Covid-19 pandemic on a prioritisation basis, in addition to Key Stage 2 Curriculum support. Members were pleased to note that progress was being made in this area.

**RESOLVED that the report be received.**

## **7. FORTHCOMING ITEMS**

The Committee received a list of items to be considered at the next scheduled meeting of the Committee to be held on 16<sup>th</sup> March 2022. The Director of Education and Children's Services reported that a new Lead Officer, namely Mr Ian Altman would be invited to attend the next meeting to participate in the discussion surrounding the new Regional Collaboration Model.

In reviewing the Committee's Forward Work Programme for 2021/22, it was noted that the meeting scheduled for 26 April 2022 may be deferred in accordance with pre-election guidance, and further information would be circulated to Members in due course.

**UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED** that the list of forthcoming items to be considered at the next meeting be noted.

**8. TO SIGN AS A CORRECT RECORD THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE COMMITTEE HELD ON THE 23 DECEMBER 2021**

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 23 December, 2021 be signed as a correct record.

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**CHAIR**

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**DATE**