

**RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**EDUCATION AND LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**Minutes** of the meeting of the Education and Lifelong Learning Services Scrutiny Committee held at the County Borough Council Offices, The Pavilions, Clydach Vale on Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> December, 2014 at 5pm.

**Present:**

County Borough Councillor (Mrs) C Leyshon – in the Chair

**County Borough Councillors:**

|                 |               |
|-----------------|---------------|
| (Mrs) J Bunnage | S. Evans-Fear |
| (Mrs) A Calvert | G Smith       |
| J Elliott       | G Thomas      |

**Co-Opted Members:-**

Mr J Horton – Parent Governor

Mr J Fish – Parent Governor

Mr C Jones – GMB

Mr D Price - Unison

**Officers in Attendance:**

Mr C Bradshaw – Director, Education & Lifelong Learning

Ms E Thomas – Service Director for Schools and Community

Ms Z Lancelott – Head of Engagement & Participation

Mrs W Edwards – Head of Community Learning

Mr B Davies – Director, Financial Services

Mr P Griffiths – Service Director, Performance & Improvement

Mr P. Nicholls – Principle Solicitor, Litigation

**38 APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received from County Borough Councillors M. Adams, A.L.Davies MBE, M Griffiths, P. Jarman, (Mrs) S J Jones, R. Lewis, B. Morgan, B. Stephens, L Walker and C Williams.

**39 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

In accordance with the Code of Conduct, there were no personal declarations of interests made, pertaining to the agenda.

**40 MINUTES**

**RESOLVED** to approve as an accurate record the minutes of the Education & Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee of the 12<sup>th</sup> November, 2014.

#### **41 ANNOUNCEMENT**

The Chair was sad to announce the recent bereavement of County Borough Councillor Pauline Jarman's husband and County Borough Councillor M. Adams's father

#### **42 GENERAL BUDGET CONSULTATION.**

The Director of Financial Services provided Members with a presentation in respect of the General Budget Consultation Process, advising that there would be three key elements to the presentation, the service improvement priorities, the Council Tax Levels and the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme. The Director stressed the fact that the general budget consultation did not include consultation activity in respect of proposed service changes (Funding for Nursery, Music and Sports Pitch Charges), as they as these are subject to separate consultations.

The Director of Financial Services outlined the consultation process which has involved the Older Persons Advisory Group, Schools Budget Forum and the public generally through an on line and hard copy questionnaire and with the opportunity also taken to gather feedback via the service change drop in sessions. Members' attention was drawn to some key facts relating to the funding of the Council's Revenue Budget and what it is spent on. The key headlines relating to the Welsh Government's Provisional Settlement which had been announced on the 8<sup>th</sup> October were outlined including a Reduction in resources for this council of -3.8%, the effect of a floor mechanism within the settlement and the Welsh Government direction that local authorities are to increase school budgets by 0.6% in 2015/16. Attention was also drawn to the starting point budget gap to 2017/18. It was reported that the final settlement was published on the 10<sup>th</sup> December 2014 with no significant change to the provisional settlement.

The Director of Financial Services also reported on the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme and the implications for the residents of the County Borough. Members were asked a series of questions and informed that their views, along with all other consultees would be used to assist Cabinet in its deliberations before producing their draft budget strategy which will be consulted upon as part of stage 2 of the general budget consultation process.

Members were given the opportunity to ask questions of the Director of Financial Services before providing their views on the specific points on the Service Improvement Priorities and Budget Proposals for 2015-16. Members questioned whether using the reserves as a solution to the funding issues was sustainable and discussed public perception in terms of how the public are able to understand the increase in the Council Tax at the same time as cuts to services. The Director of Financial Services commented that whilst using reserves does provide some flexibility in terms of allowing decisions to be made and the timing of savings being achieved, it is not sustainable and the base budget has to be reduced. The Director

of Financial Services confirmed that residents are engaged and informed via a number of channels such as engagement and drop in sessions and the use of social media. Further questions in relation to losing asset stocks to bridge the budget gap were posed to the Director, Financial Services who agreed that making the best use of the council's budget involved reviewing the asset management plans and taking the opportunity to dispose of assets where possible.

**RESOLVED** that the views of the Education & Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee be passed on to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in consideration of the Council's Service Improvement Priorities and Budget Proposals (Council Tax) for 2015-2016, as well as views on the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme, as follows:

**1. Service & Improvement Priorities**

One Member of the Committee commented that although all the priorities listed were plausible, he queried whether the Authority would be forced to do something more radical due to the current financial climate.

One Member commented that the surplus places in schools were a further drain on resources.

Members were satisfied with the seven priority areas for 2014/15.

**2. Budget Consultation 2015/16 – What are your views on Council Tax levels for 2015/16?**

Some Members felt that an increase in Council Tax would clearly not bridge the budget gap and nor would it save services and they considered that services would need to be cut, some completely.

One Member commented that 1% equates to £900,000 (excluding CTRS impact) based on existing housing stock and queried the impact of increased housing development taking place across the County Borough. The Director of Financial Services confirmed that an element of growth to the tax base had been factored in to the budget.

Members agreed that the Council should raise the Council Tax in order to maintain as many services as possible.

**3 Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme – Views on the Councils Discretionary decisions that may be added to the National Council Tax Reduction Scheme.**

One Member commented that the extended payments for a further four weeks after returning to work was sensible considering that most people are paid monthly, enabling some 'catch up' time.

All Members were satisfied with the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS)

#### **4 Any other Comments?**

There were no additional comments to report.

### **REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR, LEGAL & DEMOCRATIC SERVICES**

#### **43 EXCEPTION REPORT – COUNCIL PERFORMANCE REPORT- 30<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER 2014 (QUARTER 2).**

The Service Director, Performance and Improvement presented to Members the Exception Report agreed at the meeting of the Chairs and Vice Chairs of Scrutiny, which outlined the financial and performance management information for Education & Lifelong Learning for the period to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2014. Members were asked to consider key issues extracted from the main report that had been presented to Cabinet Performance and Resources Committee on the 20<sup>th</sup> November 2014.

One Member of the Committee asked whether it would be possible to provide committee with the figures for the number of people using Public Library Services in percentages rather than in figures and also requested information regarding mobile libraries. The Head of Community Learning agreed that this would be provided and stated that since the closure of 13 libraries the attendance figures have been closely monitored and findings confirm that the visitor numbers have to date decreased by 27% with 23% of people who have lost their local library now using their nearest available facility. Members were assured that there has been an increase in the amount of people using the mobile libraries with more children having access to the service due to the extended hours after school time.

Members sought clarity on the number of physical assaults on staff which have resulted in a number of fixed term exclusions which was highlighted in the Key Performance Issues of the Q2 report. The Service Director for Schools and Community advised that the number of assaults is small and restorative approaches are being made to guide children through their difficulties. Members were reminded that some of the issues relating to assaults can be attributed to disabilities and incidents in special schools where the behaviour needs to be carefully managed. The Director of Education & Lifelong Learning reported that the numbers of exclusions are relatively low with levels of attendance and attainment rising and explained that some instances of exclusion can be for half a day 'cooling off' period which is having an impact.

One Member questioned the standard of the Outstanding Teacher Programme (OTP) which is being rolled out across all primary and secondary schools within the next few years. The Director Education & Lifelong Learning explained that some high performing staff and outstanding teachers are supporting the OTP with schools such as Treorchy becoming accredited as Hub Schools. The Director confirmed that the accreditation programme is of a

very high quality where only good schools with very thorough teachers are attaining success.

A Member referred to the one of the Critical Improvement Actions which related to improving Member scrutiny of individual school performance and was informed that Estyn are looking to provide general scrutiny training in the future with the emphasis on the use of data. Officers agreed that a date for the training supplied by Estyn would be circulated to Members in due course and in the meantime possible in house training could be considered.

The final query on the Q2 Exception report related to Outcome 2: High Quality teaching and learning and the change in the process for standardised scores due to flaws being identified in previous years which have had an impact upon the primary and secondary school score results. The Director of Education & Lifelong Learning outlined the reasons for the change in process and explained that the procedure is now based on actual data which should, in the future, reflect in trends in comparison to those across all Wales.

The Chairman thanked Officers for their responses to the many queries raised and the Committee **RESOLVED** to note the information contained within the report.

**44. SCHOOL ATTENDANCE PERFORMANCE IN RCT FOR THE ACADEMIC YEAR 2013-2014**

With the permission of the Chair Members agreed to consider the following two items together before scrutinising and commenting on the information provided.

The Head of Engagement & Participation provided Committee Members with her report which provided an analysis of school attendance performance for the academic year 2013/14.

With regards to Primary schools the report highlighted an increased attendance rate of 1.1%, indicating an overall attendance rate of 94.50% which exceeded the Local Authority target of 94.20% by 0.30%. It was advised that the performance of all but two of the primary schools improved in 2013/14 with 58 schools evidencing an improvement of 1%. Members were informed that 79 schools surpassed their targets for 2013/14.

The Head of Engagement & Participation also outlined the secondary school performance for the academic year 2013/14 compared to 2012/13 by means of a table which demonstrated that all secondary schools have improved for the year with an increased rate of 1.2%. Members were informed that secondary school attendance had also exceeded the Local Authority target of 9.3% by 0.17%.

For both primary schools and secondary schools it was advised that the attendance of Looked After Children (LAC) remains higher than those pupils who are not.

The report further highlighted to Committee Members the attendance figures for pupil referral units, which confirmed that 3 PRUs had improved pupils attendance by at least 5.04% in 2013/14 compared to 2012/13 with detailed break down of the overall attendance figures for all three PRU's set out in Appendix D of the report.

The Head of Engagement & Participation referred to the Rhondda Cynon Taf Attendance and Wellbeing Service and outlined its performance during the academic year 2013/14. The Data Response Visits carried out by the Service have been identified as good practice by ESTYN in their recent Thematic Report on School Attendance. It was confirmed that the service will continue to monitor and liaise with school headteachers to ensure that attendance remains a priority.

The Head of Engagement & Participation concluded her presentation to committee by commenting that it was important that the Council, Governors and other public agencies continue to support the Head teachers in achieving the 95% attendance rate over the next few years.

**45. SCHOOL ATTENDANCE PERFORMANCE IN RCT FOR THE FIRST HALF TERM OF THE ACADEMIC YEAR 2014-2015**

The Head of Engagement & Participation presented her report outlining the school attendance performance for the first half term of the academic year 2014/15.

The report outlined the overall school attendance for the first half term of 2014/15 for both primary and secondary schools and Members were informed that primary school attendance is demonstrating an increase of almost 0.7% with 84 primary schools having met or bettered their targets to improve their attendance rates. The secondary school attendance for the first half term of the 2014/15 academic year also showed an increase of over 0.7% with attendance now standing at 94.86%, the highest it has ever been in RCT.

Reference was also made to the new Aberdare Community School which has achieved an impressive attendance rate of 95.26%. It was stated that all secondary schools have met or bettered their targets set to improve their attendance rates for the period.

The Head of Engagement & Participation highlighted the performance of the Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) attendance for the first half term of the 2014/15 academic year having made an improvement of almost 2%, achieving its highest rate to date. The Officer outlined the activity of the Council's Attendance & Wellbeing Service from the period 1<sup>st</sup> September 2014 to 24<sup>th</sup> October 2014 and explained how this work has been supported by the Council's Youth Engagement and Participation Service.

The Head of Engagement & Participation concluded her presentation by acknowledging the continued progress made by the primary and secondary

schools in improving attendance and of the impact this will have on educational standard in the future.

One Member praised the report and acknowledged the significant improvement achieved by both the primary and secondary schools having surpassed the targets but queried whether the bar should have been raised in terms of targets as the figure shows that RCT now ranks 17<sup>th</sup> in Wales for secondary schools. The whereabouts of the Primary School rankings was queried. The Head of Engagement & Participation responded that the Primary School rankings will be available in January 2015 and described the targets for individual secondary schools as challenging with complex formulas used. The targets set were considered robust.

The Director, Education & Lifelong Learning provided the percentages for the margins between the RCT performance and that of the best performer and best Welsh average.

Members requested sight of the overall targets for 2014/15 which it was confirmed would be provided to all Members of the Committee following the meeting.

Following discussions in relation to the Fixed Penalty Notices (FPN's) and the position of Rhondda Cynon Taf in respect of this, Members **RESOLVED** to note the content of the report outlining the school attendance performance in RCT for the academic year 2013/14 and for the first half term of the academic year 2014-2015.

**46. PERFORMANCE OF THE RHONDDA CYNON TAF LIBRARY SERVICE – WELSH PUBLIC LIBRARY STANDARDS ANNUAL REPORT 2013/14**

The Head of Community Learning provided Members with a report highlighting the performance of the Council's library service against Welsh Public Library Standards as demonstrated in the Annual Report 2013 – 14.

The Committee was advised that the Welsh Government's response to the Annual Report 2013-14 noted that the Authority achieved 8 out of the 9 Welsh Public Library Standards, the same achievement as the previous year. The Head of Community Learning commented that Rhondda Cynon Taf's performance was above average when compared with others in Wales.

Members were provided with detailed information against each of the standards achieved and noted that the service failed to meet both elements of the minimum target set due to staffing levels and the below level of qualified staff. It was reported that in future performance of the Library Service will be measured against the new 5<sup>th</sup> Framework which differs to the 4 previous frameworks on several levels. However, as the impact of the closure of the 13 libraries is yet unknown comments from the Assessors about the future performance of the Library Service were considered premature. The Head of Community Learning assured Members of the Committee that the impact of

the closure of 13 libraries is being closely monitored by the Library Service and CyMAL officers to fully assess the implications of the closures.

Members of the Committee echoed the comments of the Head of Community Learning in commending the staff for their excellent service in light of staffing levels which were below minimum target and at a time when many of the staff were facing the prospect of redundancy.

Following discussions it was **RESOLVED** to note the content of the report.

#### **47. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE SICK LIT REPORT**

The Head of Community Learning presented an update report in respect of the implementations of the recommendations made by the 'Sick Lit' Working Group.

Members were provided with background to the report and were informed that as a result of the recommendations Rhondda Cynon Taf's Library service has implemented the following definition as a safeguarding measure when considering whether a book falls into the Sick Lit books category:-

'Young Adult (12-18 years) books that explicitly promote, encourage and/or provide guidance on how to self harm and or commit suicide'.

The Head of Community Learning confirmed that following a complete review on all books within the Library Service none relating to that category were found and the officer also stated that the Library Service has amended its Stock Selection and Collection Policy. Members were assured that measures are in place to monitor all materials that are sent for consideration and that a professionally trained librarian is available to assess all new titles as well as continuing to encourage young people to read and use the facility despite a reduction in funding.

The Head of Community Learning updated Members with progress following the circulation of the Stock Selection and Collection Policy and copies of the Working Group's Sick Lit report to all schools.

In conclusion Members were reminded that the Library Service has implemented all the recommendations relating to its service as required by the Working Group which will ensure that young people are further protected from inappropriate material.

Members commended County Borough Councillors R. Lewis and A. L. Davies MBE for bringing the 'Sick Lit' issue to the attention of Committee and it was **RESOLVED** to note the content of the report.

The meeting closed at 6.45 pm

(Mrs) C Leyshon  
Chairman