

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 Monday 9th December, 2013 at 5pm.

Present:

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

County Borough Councillors:

(Mrs) J Bunnage	J Elliott	S Evans-Fear	P Jarman
(Mrs) S Jones	R Lewis	B Morgan	B Stephens
G Thomas			

Co-Opted Members:-

Mr J Horton – Parent Governor
Mr A Minton – NASUWT & Teachers' Panel
Ms C Jones – National Union of Teachers and Teachers' Panel
Mr C Jones - GMB
Mr D Price - Unison

Officers in Attendance:

Ms E Thomas – Service Director, Schools and Community
Ms W Edwards – Head of Community Learning
Ms Z Lancelot – Head of Engagement & Participation
Mr P Nicholls – Principal Solicitor, Litigation
Mr N Kelland – Principal Librarian

35 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from County Borough Councillors M Adams, (Mrs) A Calvert, A.L.Davies MBE, M Griffiths L Walker and C Williams.

36 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

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

37 MINUTES

RESOLVED to approve as an accurate record the minutes of the Education & Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee of the 13th November, 2013.

38 MATTERS ARISING.

Minute 31 – The Chairman suggested to the Committee that since the Joint scrutiny arrangements of the Joint Education Service were on hold, the Committee could undertake a scrutiny working group review into the area as an interim measure. Members discussed taking the review forward, subject to further clarity through a draft Terms of Reference.

The Committee **RESOLVED** to undertake a working group review on the Joint Education Service.

39 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, as they would be reported via separate consultations.

The Director of Financial Services outlined the consultation process and drew Members' attention to some key facts relating to the Council's Revenue spending and the key headlines relating to the Welsh Government's Provisional Settlement. He informed Members that it was expected that the details of the Welsh Government's Final Settlement would be available on 11th December 2013. He also referenced previous presentations to Council by the Group Director, Corporate Services where it was projected that the Council would need to bridge an expected funding gap of up to £19.6M in 2014/15, rising cumulatively to £70M by 2017/18. He explained key aspects of the provisional settlement including the Welsh Government direction that local authorities are to increase school budgets by 0.9% in 2014/15.

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 making their recommendations to Council.

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 for 2014-2015, 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 reasonable, he queried whether the Authority would be forced to do something more radical due to the current financial climate. The Director, Financial Services commented that the priorities set out the overall strategic direction and these needed to be delivered whilst living within available means.

2. Budget Consultation 2014/15 – Views on the level of support proposed by the Welsh Government for next year?

One Member commented on the problem with illustrating figures through percentages in relation to the settlements received over the past years rather than actual pounds. The Director, Financial Services advised that he did not have the exact pound figures available for each year, but clearly, 2014/15 was likely to be only the second year ever the Council has seen a reduction in available funding.

3. Budget Consultation 2014/15 – What are your views on Council Tax levels for 2014/15?

One Member commented that the question was impossible to answer, especially with the outcome of the phase one service cuts consultation being unknown.

4. 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 they felt the backdating of claims for 3 months was a little excessive and felt that this figure should be halved.

The 4 week extended payment for individuals returning to work was felt by Committee Members to be a reasonable period.

5. Any other Comments?

Following a query the Director, Financial Services confirmed that the process for the general budget consultation involved consulting with Scrutiny Committees, the School Budget forum and the public via online and hard copy questionnaires.

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR, LEGAL & DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

40 EXCEPTION REPORT – COUNCIL PERFORMANCE REPORT- 30TH SEPTEMBER 2013 (QUARTER 2).

The Director, Financial Services 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 30th September 2013. Members were asked to consider key issues extracted from the main report that had been presented to Cabinet Performance and Resources Committee on the 18th November 2013.

One Member of the Committee queried the measures put in place to engage with young people who leave compulsory education without qualifications. The Service Director, Schools and Community advised the Committee of the number of measures in place, advising in particular of the vulnerability profiling within secondary schools and the interventions put in place resulting from the profiling. The Service Director was asked when the vulnerability profiling commenced and the Head of Engagement & Participation advised of the pilot commenced with key stage 4 learners with the intention of being eventually rolled down to primary learners, to assist with transition planning. One Member questioned further the factors taking into consideration with the vulnerability profiling and requested examples of such interventions. The Service Director advised that with regards to the profiling factors indicators such as social economic factors (free school meals), listing on child protection / child in need registers, attendance levels, SEN, involvement in MARAC (multi agency risk assessment conferences) and youth offending activities are all taken into consideration. The Service Director advised that it was difficult to provide examples of such intervention as each was a bespoke package depending on each child's circumstances. Some examples would include additional support in literacy / numeracy, transition workers, more intensive engagement with parents/carers.

The Head of Community Learning provided the Committee with details on the Library outreach activities referred to within the Health check report. Members were advised of the various activities undertaken outside libraries, such as librarian visits to schools, family history talks and Council events, such as the open day events.

One Committee Member referred to the Behaviour Strategy within the Q2 exception report and queried whether this was still in draft form. The Service Director, Schools and Community confirmed that the strategy was still in draft form due to the need for consultations with schools and the undertaking of an audit into the current best working practices, which would assist in finalising the strategy.

Committee Members commented upon the sickness absence figures for the service and queried whether staff who were advised to refrain from work due to sickness bugs etc were still recorded as sickness or whether this was now being recorded as medical suspensions. The Service Director confirmed that discussions had taken place with HR colleagues and Trade Union representatives on the issue and confirmed that currently this was still being recorded as sickness. The Officer commented on the potential need to

change policy documents if this was to be reported differently in the future. The Committees Trade Union representatives provided further information on the issue, confirming that this was not an issue just for Education but was cross cutting, commenting on those employees working with vulnerable adults etc and commented that this would need to be looked at across the Board.

Members sought clarity on the Occupational Health statistics querying firstly the 248 Counselling statistics and whether this was due to work related stress issues and also the 18 appointments with technicians. Officers advised that the latter referred to work place assessments and the Service Director, Schools and Community agreed to seek clarity on the Counselling referrals.

One Member commented on the positive news in relation to secondary school attendance figures but queried why 3 out of the 19 secondary schools had not improved and the actions in place to address these issues. The Head of Engagement & Participation advised the Committee of the data gathering exercises undertaken on a 6 weekly cycle which assisted with identifying school attendance and the Committee were advised that if it was identified that schools were not performing then programme data response visits were undertaken. The Committee Member further queried whether attendance figures dropped during the last years of school to which the officer confirmed that this was generally the case, although spoke of the early interventions put in place to try to re-engage with pupils.

The national initiative of Professional Learning Communities was queried by Members in respect of the development of cohesive approaches in literacy and numeracy and it was queried why this was now the responsibility of the schools rather than the Authority. The Service Director, Schools and Community advised that the funding for such activities was now in the main delegated directly to schools through grant funding, therefore minimising the need for Authority involvement.

The Service Director, Community and Schools was queried as to the envisaged benefits from the new on line school admissions service and the provision of the Hwb, virtual Learning Environment which had missed its target was also queried. The Service Director advised of both the environmental benefits of using an online schools admission service as well as the streamlining of the process for both the Authority and for parents and carers. With regards to Hwb, the Committee were advised that this was the all Wales Learning platform supported by the Welsh Government which was to support the national action to encourage, support and prepare teachers to share digital practices and curriculum resources. The Service Director confirmed that the roll out of training to schools to enable access to Hwb is still on track but the content within the platform itself still requires further development.

Officers were questioned on the measures in place to drive up standards in both early years settings and schools to improve the outcomes for all children and the Service Director confirmed that this was measured through the foundation phase outcomes, which could be provided to Members.

The three year financial plans for schools was also queried and the Service Director advised that currently only one school was in a budget deficit and that the Director, Education & Lifelong Learning had written a warning letter to the school and commented that recovery plans were necessary for deficit budget. The Member queried how robust the recovery plans could be in-light of the current service cut consultations and the Director of Finance commented that production of recovery plans needed to be put in place although commented on the potential difficulties with the robustness of the plans due to Welsh Government not providing 3 year financial projections.

One Member commented on the analysis of data in relation to 3 out of 19 primary clusters underperforming in relation to the % of primary pupils with a standardised score of 95 or more in mathematics test. The Member queried the number of schools this related to and the Service Director, advised that she was unable to give specific figures as the number of schools within each cluster varied. The Officer was queried further as to whether this underperformance related to pupil difficulties or teaching styles and the Service Director confirmed that there was a general weakness in relation to numeracy, and referenced the recent PISA test results where Wales were ranked as 43rd in Maths out of 65 Countries. The Officer confirmed that a lot of work had been undertaken in relation to up-skilling of school staff within the subject area, with different teaching methods being piloted.

One Member requested detail on the 'Your Futures First' project referenced within the report and the Head of Engagement & Participation advised that this was a 12 week pre-engagement project run alongside Careers Wales and Canopi and agreed to provide further information to the Committee on the project.

Further clarity was raised in respect of the review undertaken in relation to non formal and informal educational interventions funded through Fframwaith and the Service Director, Community and Schools agreed to provide further clarity on the review to Members at a future date.

The final query on the Q2 Exception report related to the critical improvement action in relation to the removal of an estimated 1,250 surplus school places and a Member of the Committee queried whether the figures for the proposed closure of Pentre Primary school was contained within this figure. Officers agreed to seek clarity on the figure and advise Members accordingly.

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR, EDUCATION & LIFELONG LEARNING

41 SCHOOL ATTENDANCE PERFORMANCE IN RHONDDA CYNON TAF FOR THE FIRST HALF TERM OF THE ACADEMIC YEAR 2013 – 14.

The Head of Engagement & Participation provided Committee Members with her report which provided an analysis of school attendance performance for the first half term of 2013/14, to the end of October, 2013.

With regards to Primary schools the report highlighted an increased attendance rate of 0.7%, indicating an overall attendance rate of 94.82%. It was advised that of 110 primary schools, 82 schools had met or bettered their targets set to improve their attendance rates, 45 schools had achieved greater or equal to 95%, 19 schools achieved greater or equal to 96% and 2 schools Ceodylan and Penygrawsi both exceeded 97% attendance. The Officer also proceeded to advise of the work carried out by the Attendance and wellbeing service during the same period.

The Committee were also advised of the secondary school attendance rates, with the Officer advising that 17 of the 19 secondary schools had improved pupils attendance in the first half term, with an increase of 0.66% attendance compared to the statistics for the year previously. It was confirmed that secondary school attendance now stood at 94.07%, the highest it had ever been within Rhondda Cynon Taf.

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 3% in the first half term, with Ty Gwyn having made an improvement of 6.56%.

The Head of Engagement & Participation concluded her report 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.

Committee Members queried whether parents taking children out of school during term time for holidays or long weekends was still a problem and the Officer confirmed that there had been a noticeable decrease in this trend, commenting on the organised approaches now taken by schools and the work with the Consortia in improving attendance.

The Head of Engagement and Participation was also queried as to whether any analysis had been conducted between school attendance and disadvantaged children, and the Committee were advised that research had been undertaken using the Free School Meals (FSM) indicator, although she added that this was not an accurate benchmark as it was based on take up rather than entitlement. The Officer advised that although the gap had been narrowed, there was still a higher absence rate illustrated by those on FSM.

The Committee **RESOLVED** to note the contents of the report.

42 PERFORMANCE OF THE RHONDDA CYNON TAF LIBRARY SERVICE – WELSH PUBLIC LIBRARY STANDARDS ANNUAL REPORT 2012/13

The Head of Community Learning provided Members with a report highlighting the performance of the Council's library service against the Welsh public library standards as demonstrated in the Annual Report 2012 – 13.

The Committee were advised that the Welsh Government's response to the Annual Report 2012-13 noted that the Authority achieved 8 out of the 9 Welsh Public Library standards, an increase of 2 over the 2011-12 year. The Head of Community Learning commented that the average number of standards being met by all authorities in 2012-13 was 6, the highest number achieved was 8, and the lowest 3, therefore indicating that Rhondda Cynon Taf's performance was above average when compared with others in Wales.

Members of the Committee were provided with detailed analysis of each of the standards with the officer advising that the standard that the service failed to meet related to staffing, indicating that staffing levels were below the minimum target set, which could cause operational difficulties.

The Head of Community Learning concluded her report by advising that the Welsh Government's feedback praised service managers for careful and effective management of resources and commended the service for the improvements made over the past 2 years. The Head of Community Learning continued by referring to the budget consultation exercise, which may have an impact on the breadth and depth of the Library service and on the number of library standards the Authority can meet in the future.

Members of the Committee commended the service and its staff for the excellent service provided in light of staffing levels which were below the minimum target. Members also commented on the Welsh Government's recognition of the challenges facing local authorities in the current economic climate and the positive changes that are to be made to the new framework standards, allowing it to become more flexible.

One Member took the opportunity to reiterate the Ministers statement in relation to 'soft options' in respect of the current economic climate and budget allocations.

Following discussions the Committee **RESOLVED** to note the contents of the report.

43 SCHOOL EXCLUSION DATA FOR THE ACADEMIC YEAR 2012 – 13

The Service Director, Schools and Community referred Members attention to the report before them which provided an analysis of school exclusion data for the last academic year 2012/13 compared to 2011/12., which suggested that significant improvements had been achieved.

Within the report the Committee were provided with background data in respect of explanations as to fixed term exclusions and permanent exclusions, the processes used when a pupil is to be excluded and the circumstances that could lead to exclusions. The report also highlighted areas surrounding provisions made within schools to meet the needs of learners with challenging behaviour. The Committee were advised of the importance in ensuring all schools have a robust behaviour policy that is consistently implemented,

which was central to minimising the risk of inappropriate behaviour and exclusions.

The Service Director, Schools and Community highlighted to Members that the number of exclusions in the 2012/13 academic year had fallen when compared to 2011/12. However, it was highlighted within the report that some schools continue to use exclusion too frequently as a measure to address poor behaviour, which can have a detrimental impact on the educational outcomes for vulnerable children and young people. The Officer also commented on the importance with schools continuing to develop appropriate curriculum options for all pupils and the need to have internal arrangements in place to manage pupils with difficult behaviour.

One Committee Member commented on the positive news of the decrease in exclusions, but commented on the reported increase in assault and violence towards staff, and the Member queried the measures in place to protect staff from such behaviour. The Service Director, Schools and Community advised that training was provided to staff to assist them in dealing with potential volatile situations and advised Members of the types of training provided. Another Member commented on the usefulness of receiving All Wales comparative data on the subject whilst another Committee Member commented upon the Additional Needs Funding and the £2.7 million delegated from the Local Authority to Local Cluster Group panels to support the needs of pupils with severe and persistent SEN in mainstream settings.

The Committee **RESOLVED** to Note the contents of the report.

44 **FFRAMWAITH MINUTES.**

One Member of the Committee queried the questioning of the Minutes and following discussions the Committee **RESOLVED** to note the minutes of the Fframwaith Partnership Board meetings held on the 27th September, 2013.

The meeting closed at 6.45 pm

(Mrs) C Leyshon
Chairman

This page intentionally blank