



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNCIL CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee meeting held on Wednesday, 22 July 2020 at 3.00 pm at the Virtual Meeting.

County Borough Councillors - Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee Members in attendance:-

Councillor S. Rees-Owen (Chair)

Councillor W Lewis	Councillor J Brencher
Councillor H Fychan	Councillor A Calvert
Councillor S Powell	Councillor M Griffiths
Councillor G Jones	Councillor G Stacey
Councillor J Edwards	Councillor R Turner

Co-Opted Members in attendance:-

Mr J Fish, Voting Elected Parent / Governor Representative
Mr K Wilhite, Voting Elected Parent / Governor Representative

Officers in attendance:-

Mr C Hanagan, Service Director of Democratic Services & Communication
Mr P Nicholls, Service Director, Legal Services
Ms G Davies, Director of Education and Inclusion Services

County Borough Councillors in attendance:-

Councillor S Evans and Councillor J Rosser

1 Chair's Welcome

The Chair welcomed Members and Officers to the first Virtual Meeting of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee and explained how today's meeting would be conducted.

The Chair on behalf of the Children and Young People Committee continued by thanking all school staff and officers who have worked tirelessly throughout the Pandemic under extreme pressure and continuing to do so in these uncertain times.

2 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from the following County Borough Councillors S. Evans, M Diamond, M Powell and Co-opted Member Ms R Nicholls.

3 Declaration of Interest

RESOLVED – that in accordance with the Members’ Code of Conduct, the following declarations of interest were made:-

1. County Borough Councillor S Powell declared the following personal interests pertaining to Agenda Item 5 –“ Update in respect of Covid 19 from the Director of Education & Inclusion Services” as his wife is a primary school teacher in RCT..

4 Minutes

It was **RESOLVED** to approve the minutes of the 26th February 2020 and the 11th March 2020 as an accurate reflection of the meeting.

5 Update on Covid 19 Position in Rhondda Cynon Taf

The Service Director Democratic Services & Communications informed the Committee that the purpose of the report put before them is to provide Members the opportunity to scrutinise and review the Council’s response to the Covid 19 Pandemic from an Education and School’s perspective. The Service Director Democratic Services and Communication continued and explained that the report highlights the critical actions taken by the Council since the Covid 19 restrictions were imposed by the UK and Welsh Government and also the further steps the Council will take in respect of the service planning in the next recovery phase.

It was also brought to the Committees attention that given the fast moving nature of these matters it is important to acknowledge that the way information is provided to Scrutiny and may need presented in different formats for the foreseeable future, the Service Director in invited the Director of Education and Inclusion Services to provide a verbal update.

The Director of Education and Inclusion Services thanked Members for the opportunity to update them and explained that she would inform Members in two part, firstly the actions that have been taken since March and the next steps for returning to school in September.

The Director of Education and Inclusion Service highlighted the key points of the work that had been undertaken over the last few months. Concerning the hub provision the Director explained that there had been a significant growth in the number of families and children accessing the childcare provision and this meant that Childcare hub settings increased from 13 to 25 supporting vulnerable learners and children of essential workers. It was explained that there has been a great deal of partnership working with Children’s Services to ensure the most vulnerable children received the services that was needed.

Members were informed that from the first weekend after the closing of schools the provision of emergency online applications were made available for key workers and vulnerable families that required the childcare provision. It was highlighted that the staffing of these facilities were supported by Head teachers, teaching staff and support staff etc. who have provided an excellent service during these unprecedented times.

It was explained that the childcare provision for key workers continued during term time, weekend, school holidays and bank holidays along with core school

hours provision being provided for the most vulnerable children. In addition to this provision was also made during half term break for the most vulnerable .Transport was provided to take pupils to the hub venues.

The Director of Education and Inclusion Services continued to update Members on the work that has been undertaken following the Welsh Government announcement that school would open on the 29th June. Members were provided with an overview of the measures that had been put in place to make the staff and pupils return to school as smoothly and as safely as possible, it was explained that the Local Authority has provided detailed guidance in respect of health and safety issues, to ensure that consistent arrangements were in place for schools. Risk assessments have been established and reviewed by the Council's Health and Safety Officers and signed off by the Chair of Governing Bodies. Transport has been put in place for pupils to attend school safely and arrangements put in place to promote social distancing.

The Director of Education explained that the local authority provided guidance in respect of distance learning to schools so that pupils were able to continue their education through this challenging time.

The Director continued by explaining the support provided for digitally excluded learners to ensure access to digital learning, it was brought to Members attention that a review of digitally excluded learners had identified 2,345 digitally excluded learners across the County Borough. It was explained that a plan was implemented to collect any devices from schools for repurposing and the redistribution of these to those in need. Schools that have released devices for digitally excluded learners will also have their stock replenished where necessary. It was highlighted that where broadband was an issue for some pupil. The Local Authority provided a 4G Wi-Fi Package.

Before taking any questions the Director reiterate the work that had been done between schools and other partnerships had been exceptional.

The Chair thanked the Officer for a very comprehensive overview and opened up the floor for Members questions.

A Member continued to praise the work of each member of staff throughout this difficult situation and with the fast turnover of information from Welsh Government wanted to commend them for keeping pupils and parents updated with information to ensure their learning was able to continue as best it could. The Member raised concerns over the pupils that were digital excluded and ask whether there was any help for the most vulnerable with any Wi-Fi issues and also if there had been any feedback from teachers with regards to pupil engagement.

The Officer explained that monitoring engagement is a priority of both Local Authority and schools. Digitally excluded learners accessed work packs from schools as an interim measure to ensure that there was continuity in learning and high quality distance learning. It was explained that some families struggled more than others and there are systems in place to monitor engagement with distance learning in partnership with the school improvement colleagues in Central South Consortium.

In relations to the IT support Members were informed that there would be support for families and this would continue.

Another Member comment that this has been a very challenging time and is pleased to have the opportunity to consider the information before the return to schools in September. The Member stated that poverty is a problem within RCT and with the added pressures of Covid 19 on vulnerable families and going forward with the winter pressures and the insecurities of jobs which would lead to more children living in poverty. The Member also wanted clarification on what support there was for pupils who attended Welsh Medium School provision with regards to home learning especially when many parents are not Welsh speakers.

The Director explained that the vulnerable children have received regular wellbeing checks from schools and have been encouraged to attend childcare provision. Children on the most vulnerable list have been given priority for emergency childcare. FSM meal provision earlier in lockdown delivered in communities ensured access to entitled meals and the roll out of the BACS payments provision for the FSM learners later on was swiftly put in place and take up has been excellent. This will continue through the Summer.

The Director explained that Welsh Government has allocated a sum of £29 Million for the whole of Wales and the grant would enable us to provide extra support for priority groups. The Chair asked if families are aware of the grant so parents can take this into consideration when choosing schools in the future. The Director explained that we need to see the terms and conditions of the grant before we can advise parents and carers of its purpose and likely impact. .

Members put forward questions regarding accountability along with the issue of mental health and wellbeing for both pupils and staff , outcomes for learners which are of great concern to this committee.

Members asked what areas of concern the local authority education department had in relation to children returning in September along with the mental health and wellbeing of the staff throughout this unprecedented time.

The Director explained that the main concerns was the re-engagement of parents and vulnerable pupils with Education following a period where attending school has not mandatory. Moving forward , it is the expectation that all learners return to school. HR provide effective communication with staff on a regular basis with regards to wellbeing and staff's mental health is of paramount importance given the workloads pressures on staff and the pace of change. We will continue to monitor this on a regular basis.

A Member required clarity in respect of the extra provision of teaching staff and support staff which was mentioned as part of a statement from Welsh Government. The Director clarified that this would be considered as part of the Welsh Government £29 Million for schools. Specific allocation had not yet been confirmed.

The Chair requested that data on increasing numbers of children requiring FSMs as a result of the social problems families are facing as a result of Covid are brought back to the committee for Members to obtain a clearer picture going forward.

The Director of Education provided Members with an overview in respect of pupils returning to school for the Autumn term. It was explained that the Welsh Government has stated that all learners are to be back in school by the 14th

September 2020. Guidance has been issued and will be updated during the course of the summer to include transport and early years has been received..

Over previous Summer Members will be aware that childcare provision had previously been provided by Welsh Government by means of the SHEP Programme. However, this funding has now ceased, and been replaced with new funding streams for supporting the most vulnerable . Members acknowledged the new provision that has been made available for vulnerable families over what can be a very long summer period. Some limited provision is also planned for high priority essential workers.

The Director continued to explain the plans and risk assessment which have been put in place by schools and the detailed guidance and support provided.

Members continue to put their questions and observations and many raised concerns on the pressure put on schools and staff to maintain social distancing and the extra work that staff had to take on board. It was explained that health and safety is paramount and schools are being supported by a range of teams to make to the return as seamless as possible. Signage and PPE has been provided and comprehensive advise in relation to all operational aspects

The Chair thanked the officer for the update and welcomed the Cabinet Member for Education and inclusion services to address the Committee .

The Cabinet Member expressed her thanks and admiration for each and every member of staff for the hard work and dedication over the course of the pandemic and praised pupils and families for working with the Local Authority in the best interest of the learners of RCT.

The Chair thanked Members and Officers for their input in to Meeting and the Committee **RESOLVED** to

- Acknowledge the information put before them;
- Receive data in respect of the increase numbers of pupils receiving FSM and monitor the trend.;
- Monitor and review the Mental Health and Wellbeing of both Pupils and staff as a result of Covid 19;
- Monitor pupils attainment in the Autumn term ;and
- Receive data with regards to Welsh Medium Education take up going forward.

6 Chair's Review and Close

The Chair thanked Officers and Members for their contribution to the Meeting and thanked all School and Education Staff for their hard work and commitment over the last few months.

This meeting closed at 16:40

**CLLR S REES-OWEN
CHAIR.**