

Minutes of the Education, Skills and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee

8 December 2022

Port Talbot Civic Centre / Remotely - Hybrid

Chairperson:	Councillor R.Phillips
Councillors:	W.Carpenter, M.Crowley, N.Goldup-John, J.Henton, J.Jones, C.Lewis, R.Mizen, P.A.Rees, S.Renkes, S.H.Reynolds and D.Whitelock
Co-opted Voting Members:	M.Caddick and L.Newman
Officers In Attendance	I.Guy, H.Lervy, C.Millis, A.Thomas, P.Walker, R.Crowhurst, W.John, J.Burge, S.Jones, H.Thomas, S.McCluskie and A.Thomas.
Cabinet Invitees:	Councillors N. Jenkins and J. Hurley

1. **CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies were received from Cllr R Mizen.

The Chair confirmed, Members of the Committee would be scrutinising items 7, 9 and 10 of the Cabinet Board.

2. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Cllr S. Reynolds made a declaration of interest against item 7 of the Cabinet Board Agenda.

3. **MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

Minutes of the previous Education, Skills and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee, held on the 27th October 2022, were approved as an accurate record.

4. **COVID-19 UPDATE (VERBAL)**

The Scrutiny Committee were provided with a verbal update to Agenda item 4. It was noted, the impact of Covid contributed to the decrease in pupil attendance, primarily affecting individual mental health and wellbeing. Members were informed, learning experiences in terms of literacy and numeracy faced an ongoing deficit. Staff were continuing to support pupils and families on this.

Policy restrictions, parental guidance and media coverage continued to be a challenge. Benefits were highlighted for technology development, particularly with synchronous and asynchronous learning platforms. Staggered changes to structures were now being seen within schools, an example being reduction of breaks times.

Officers advised, since July 2022 Covid absences were no longer recorded as a specific reasoning to pupil non-attendance.

5. **FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME 2022/23**

Members queried an update of a request made on the scrutiny forward work programme relating to the cost of living crisis. Members advised a report would be due at a future Committee, scheduled and this is scheduled within the Forward Work Programme.

Members made a request for an update surrounding Language Welsh within Schools following the outcome of the census programme.

Members also made a request that Officers fully inform the Scrutiny Committee of reports expected at Cabinet Board meetings so that due process had been followed in terms of Scrutiny processes.

6. **PRE DECISION SCRUTINY**

Quarter 2 Performance

Members reviewed the Quarter 2 Performance report, and asked Officers to explain the outcome of PI.2.4, linked to Well-being Objective 4. Members queried the low figure of 22, against the target figure of 45.

Officers give an overview of the challenges faced, especially in terms of funding. A reduction in European funding along with the shared prosperity fund was discussed. Members were also informed of the difficulties in engagement processes with families post pandemic. Members were advised, Officers were keen to explore an avenue of alternative tactics in combating the ongoing issues.

Members gave thanks to the continuing efforts and progress Officers had in raising money within communities and an increase to income generation for ongoing events at specific locations, including Margam Orangery and the continuation of Weddings.

The agenda item is a matter for monitoring and will be noted.

Education Safeguarding

Members were presented with the report which contained an update on the safeguarding of Children within Schools across the County Borough.

Officers received questions relating to a training event, which took place in November 2022. The Co-opted member asked Officers to confirm that the event went ahead and requested some feedback in terms of positives and any negatives faced during the event.

Officer's confirmed the event went ahead on the 28th November 2022, and was well attended stating the event had been just short of 50 attendees. Members were advised, following the event schools had requested a train the trainer session in the hope of bringing the virtual training forward. Officers also confirmed funding had been secured to run the train the trainer event.

The report is a matter for monitoring and is noted.

Pupil Attendance

Members were provided with an update on pupil attendance within Neath Port Talbot Schools, and particular issues relating to this context.

Members stated the report to be interesting, but highlighted the challenges going forward in terms of parents opting to home school children. Members raised concerns to the quality of home schooling and the impact to the registration of children.

A home schooling bill of a mandatory attendance register proposed within English schools was tabled. Members queried if this approach had been considered for schools in NPT.

Officers provided Members with an explanation, stating a report would follow later in the year as part of the forward work programme. The report would contain details of elective home schooling. Officers went on to confirm, schools had seen an increase in the number of pupils being home schooled. Members were updated on the new guidance currently in draft format, and Officers divulged pupil attendance registers were being considered, along with forms to capture details how home schooling is being delivered and what improvements can be made.

Members questioned penalties notices parents faced for lack of pupil attendance, and what if any considerations were given during ongoing tough times, especially in terms of the cost of living crisis. Members were informed, schools had issued warning letters of fixed penalty charges but this had been considered a last resort. Schools were mindful, children and parents needed to adapt after the pandemic and the additional blended learning programmes. Officers further elaborated the benefit of issuing fixed penalty notices as an alternative to prosecution and court proceedings. Again this option was outlined to be a last resort measure.

Officers further informed Members of the collaboration work being undertaken in conjunction with departments of the Social Services Directorate.

7. **URGENT ITEMS**

There were none.

Councillor R.Phillips

Chairperson