

Minutes of the Education, Skills and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee

24 October 2024

Multi-Location Meeting - Council Chamber, Port Talbot & Microsoft Teams

Chairperson:	Councillor R.Phillips
Councillors:	N.Goldup-John, L.Heard, J.Henton, D.Keogh, R.Mizen, P.A.Rees, S.H.Reynolds, P.Rogers and B.Woolford
Co-opted Voting Members:	A. Amor and M.Caddick
Officers In Attendance	H.Lervy, C.Millis, A.Thomas, R.Crowhurst, C.Morris, Z.Ashton, J.Haeney, H.Jones, G. Powell and A.Spooner-Cleverly, S.Griffiths, D.Evans, J.Jones and P.Chivers
Cabinet Invitees:	Councillors N.Jenkins and C.Phillips

1. **CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest received.

3. **MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 September 2024 were approved as an accurate record of proceedings.

4. **TO CONSIDER ITEMS FROM THE CABINET FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME**

Members considered items from the Cabinet Forward Work Programme

(a) **Youth Engagement Strategy**

The Head of Support Services and Transformation stated that the strategy was required to fulfil the councils' obligations and to promote a multi-agency approach to supporting young people.

Members enquired whether there would be a further action plan and how it would be tracked and monitored, members commented that the strategy action points were not dated. Members asked if there was an intention to map third sector provision, and, if so whether the Social Services Local Area Co-ordinators could assist.

Officers confirmed that the strategy did include the beginnings of an action plan, it was hoped that the Youth Engagement Strategy Group would be re-established and could develop their own action plan which they could monitor. The strategy focuses on young people not in education, employment or training and those young people who are at risk of youth homelessness and there is a good understanding of third sector mapping in relation to those issues. There are well established multi agency operational groups in place.

Members expressed the importance of mapping going forward and how this could help when limited funding was available.

Officers confirmed that members views will be feedback to the Youth Engagement Strategy Group, once formed.

Following scrutiny, members supported the recommendation outlined in the draft Cabinet report.

(b) **Implementation of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 in non-maintained settings, primary and secondary schools and all age schools and into Post 16**

The Head of Early Years, Inclusion and Partnerships provided a brief overview of the report.

Members commented that the number of children with additional learning needs (ALN) was increasing but there was insufficient funding to address this.

The Head of Early Years, Inclusion and Partnerships agreed that it was a difficult situation with increasing numbers of children with ALN. It is difficult to predict numbers; there are children with complex needs moving into the borough. Additional grants from Welsh Government for ALN have been used to support schools. There is wider support available from training, with support services visiting schools to help with provision and assessment.

Officers advised members that provisions are regularly reviewed. Work is ongoing to consider all the specialist provision across the authority and the projected need, working closely with other service areas to ensure there is sufficient provision to meet need. It is acknowledged that some pupils may require over and above provision. To address this within mainstream schools, additional outreach support is offered to these pupils. Work is undertaken with Ysgol Maes Y Coed to ensure that staff supporting young people receive support, training and advice.

The Director of Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning acknowledged the pressure on school budgets. There is less financial pressure in Learning Support Centres (LSC's) and Specialist Schools, but this cannot be considered in isolation. Most pupils with additional learning needs attend mainstream schools and the needs of young people need to be met in the entirety of the education budget not only within LSC's. It was noted that if the needs of young people are not being met, this may result in out of county placements and increased budget pressures. The Director commented on a recently published WLGA paper which outlined pressures in local government public services and highlighted over £100m of unfunded pressures in education in Wales; this was mainly due to increased incidence of ALN in schools. Within Neath Port Talbot the increase in ALN has been particularly within Early Years.

The Cabinet Member for Education and Early Years agreed the timelines for the ALN reform are tight, but complimented the team on what has been achieved to date. ALN reform is not fully funded from Welsh Government and is putting pressure on local authorities; all members were encouraged to lobby UK and Welsh Government for full funding.

The Director of Finance advised members that when Welsh Government introduced the legislation, the impact assessment concluded that there would be no additional cost to local authorities and therefore no funding was provided through the Revenue Support Grant. Some one-off grant funding was available but no core funding, it was suggested that the Welsh Government impact assessment should be reviewed.

Following scrutiny, the report was noted.

(c) **2025/2026 Budget**

The Director of Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning advised members that Directors, Heads of Service and accountable managers were working to achieve the required savings proposals across the local authority. The guiding principles were, where possible, to increase income, cover core costs against grants, protect public services and jobs. The consultation period has not yet commenced, and the proposals presented to members were part of a pre-consultation engagement exercise for members comments and ideas. Proposals have been based on currently known information and the assumption that grants and funding levels will continue. Some detail is still unavailable, however, if the proposals do form part of the official consultation proposals, more detail will be available.

Officers provided an overview of the budget proposals reference ELL-A – ELL-G as contained within the agenda pack. The savings for Margam Country Park are part of a three-year plan and a report will be presented to members in January, containing the new business plan and parking review. New events have been introduced at the park. In relation to staffing, there has been some staff progression, and one staff member has expressed an interest in retirement. There is a slight delay to the cinema project at Pontardawe Arts Centre, but it was hoped that this will be open for trading in March 2025. Savings have been realised from the closure of Pontardawe Swimming Pool. A new catering facility has been introduced at the Aqua Splash in Aberavon, which is operated by Celtic Leisure. Some schools are reviewing the service level agreement they have for the Education Learning Resource Service (ELRS). The savings in the ELRS area relate to the change of the use of technologies.

Members raised concern regarding potential staff redundancies and unfilled vacancies. Members commented that Margam Country Park

was currently not making savings and questioned how savings will be achieved in the next financial year. Members commented that indoor leisure trading improvements were based on staff morale and considering Celtic Leisure was not being brought back in house next year, whether staff morale would enable these savings to be delivered.

The Director of Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning acknowledged that any prediction of increased income could be affected by factors such as poor weather. The target across the suite of services was broadly achievable, with the ability to over achieve in some areas, such as the new cinema and catering facility at Pontardawe Arts Centre. In relation to Margam Country Park, predicted income is not static during the year and is dependent on weather and organised events. The Director was not aware of any predicted budget pressures in Margam Park. The Director acknowledged that there are risks for the ELRS; schools are looking to save money on non-statutory areas, due to budget pressures.

Members referred to budget proposal reference ELLL-D and requested a further breakdown.

The Director of Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning confirmed that part of the management fee provided to Celtic Leisure was to run Pontardawe Swimming Pool and due to the pool closure, efficiencies will be made. A feasibility study is currently being undertaken to identify land and funding for a new pool. There is a risk going forward that if land and funding were identified the subsidy would have to be built back in.

Members enquired whether there were long term plans for the waste ground at the end of Princess Margaret Way on Aberafan Seafront? Members enquired if the land could be used temporarily to provide chargeable parking for camper vans.

The Head of Planning and Public Protection advised members that the land was allocated for housing within the current Local Development Plan which is in the process of being reviewed. Options for future uses of the land are being considered, the land could be used for housing, commercial use or a mix of both. The Sea Front Regeneration Strategy is currently out for consultation and members were encouraged to share their views.

The Head of Support Services and Transformation gave an overview of the budget proposal ELLL-H – ELLL-J contained within the agenda pack. Information was limited at this time, as almost all proposed savings related to jobs. However, confidence was held that compulsory redundancies would be avoided. It was noted that the proposal for the full recharge of cleaning costs was difficult as school budgets are under pressure. There is an externally led review of all existing arrangements in relation to home to school transport, this work crosses the Environment and Education Directorates.

Members expressed concern over children who were not catered for in the current home to school transport system and the possible implications of the review.

The Director of Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning confirmed the review of home to school transport was approved by Cabinet and will not change any pupil's entitlement. The Welsh Governments Home to School Transport policy is clear but some families may fall just outside of the criteria, and it was acknowledged that this is difficult for some families.

Members raised concern over the use of external consultants and felt the review could have been conducted by existing staff.

The Director of Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning advised members that the home to school transport review would not result in any job losses as a result of external consultants being appointed. It was noted that the home to school transport budget and strategy is held by the Education Directorate, but the commissioning and the procurement is carried out by the Environment Directorate. It was suggested that further information could be provided to the committee by the Head of Engineering and Transport in the Environment Directorate.

Members enquired how the external consultants are being monitored and whether the amount of savings achieved is known. It was noted that the consultants were costly to engage.

Members expressed concern regarding pupils who may be impacted by the home to school transport review and requested that the results of the review, once concluded, are shared with the committee.

In relation to budget proposal ELLL-I, members enquired whether any modelling had been undertaken with regards to primary schools leaving the local authority provision.

The Head of Support Services and Transformation advised members that extensive modelling had previously been undertaken in relation to the full recharge of costs to schools' proposal. Schools are aware of the services offered by the local authority, which is over and above what would be available through external providers.

The Director of Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning confirmed that this savings strategy was only put forward if schools were not required to provide other efficiency savings, schools are facing budget pressures, and three schools would be in deficit by the end of the financial year. This is the only budget cut at the moment that is referenced towards the delegated school's budget.

The Cabinet member for Education and Early Years commented that Neath Port Talbot Council funding per pupil, was one of the lowest in Wales, particularly in relation to secondary schools. Over the last two years the delegated school budget has increased by 7.9% and 8.4%, but the starting level was low and historically the delegated school's budget has been underfunded.

The Head of Education Development advised members that a key staff member had been seconded to Welsh Government for two days a week to support work on the curriculum, which has resulted in a saving.

The Director of Education Leisure and Lifelong Learning referenced budget proposal ELLL-L and advised members the savings related to legacy costs associated with the early access to pension funds, this had reduced over time as pension scheme members had died.

The Head of Early Years, Inclusion and Participation provided members with an overview of the budget proposals ELLL-M to ELLL-O and noted that two posts in the Education Psychology Service and Learning Difficulty Team were offset against grant funding. There is a piece of work ongoing with older children specifically with emotional, social, emotional behavioural difficulties. This has been offset against grant funding for this year.

Members enquired whether the grants that are being offset against,

existed before, and did they fund anything that has been lost as the funding is now offset against staffing costs?

The Head of Early Years, Inclusion and Participation confirmed that the grants were in existence and are reviewed annually. As work is completed, new work is undertaken.

The Director of Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning confirmed that the proposals were based on assumption that the current grants will continue, and this was a risk until the UK Government budget was announced. This proposal will be reviewed if there are any changes to grant funding and it was acknowledged that this approach will not be sustainable in the longer term.

The Head of Planning and Public Protection outlined the budget proposals ENV-Q to ENV-Z which relate to the Public Protection Service, in the Environmental Health, Trading Standards, Food and Health Protection Service areas. It was noted that the proposals were difficult and are a mixture of income generation ideas and reduction of various budget lines. The proposals will affect posts and service delivery.

With reference to proposal ENV-Q, the Head of Service confirmed that this would be delivered through the introduction of an increased income target associated with the Pest Control service. It was noted that in light of current levels of service demand and performance, there is the potential to achieve this increased income target without increasing fees.

With reference to proposal ENV-R, the Head of Service confirmed that there was a potential impact on the Planning Development Management Service because Environmental Health Officers carry out consults as part of the planning process. However, it was noted that such costs could be clawed-back via fee income generated through any established Planning Performance Agreements.

With reference to proposal ENV-X, the Head of Service confirmed that there are implications with this proposal as it undermines succession planning going forward. Any reduction in the services specific professional fees budget may mean that the corporate centre will be used when dealing with particularly complex prosecution cases.

With reference to proposal ENV-Y, the Head of Service noted that members will likely be aware that, the service is struggling with the statutory regulatory services that it provides and has already stopped delivering some discretionary functions/services. There is a further potential impact should this budget proposal be progressed.

The budget proposal ENV-Z relates to the Food and Health Protection Service. There is a current vacant part time post within the structure, funding for the post was earmarked for succession planning purposes. The vacant post was planned to be converted to a trainee Environmental Health Officer post to overcome recruitment issues. In the longer term, this proposal, if progressed would undermine succession planning.

Members requested training on issues that fall under the Environment Directorate.

Members commented on proposals ENV-X-ENV-Z and the pressures these proposals would have on the department in ensuring services meet the required standards. By making further cuts there was a risk that the department would not meet its statutory duties.

The Deputy Leader commented that historically, environmental health issues have been reported to this committee but going forward this may not be the most appropriate structure. The Deputy Leader agreed with previous comments made regarding the historic patterns of spend in relation to the delegated school's budget; the current administration were aware of the need to address this, but there were difficulties considering the continued austerity faced by the council. The Deputy Leader encouraged members to make representations to government in relation to the need for proper investment into public services at all levels.

Members commented that there was insufficient detail in the budget proposals and requested a timeline for the budget consultation. Members also asked for clarification regarding the per pupil funding situation, which may be different to other local authorities.

The Head of Support Services and Transformation confirmed that a report was scheduled to come to scrutiny on School Budget Pressures which would contain more information on per pupil funding.

The Director of Finance advised members this was the first time that the budget proposals had been presented to members at this early

stage in the process; the proposals represented the early plans identified to meet targets. The early proposals are based on assumptions as the budget is yet to be announced. It was hoped that following discussion at scrutiny, members may suggest alternative proposals to help shape the final proposals. Discussions at scrutiny committees will be considered by officers, with information from next week's budget announcement, which will provide an indication of the possible impact for the Welsh budget; the local government settlement will be announced mid-December. A special meeting of Cabinet will be held on the 11th of December to consider further details in relation to the proposals to take forward for formal consultation. Individual impact assessments will be available once the consultation has determined the final proposals. This scrutiny committee will meet on 16th January to consider the proposals further with the consultation ending on 17th January. Following consultation, officers will develop final proposals for Cabinet consideration at the end of February with Council meeting a week later.

All members were advised that there is an All-Members Seminar taking place on 28th November for budget training which will be delivered by the WLGA.

Following scrutiny, members noted the report and the suggestions and views put forward by the committee.

5. **TO CONSIDER ITEMS FROM THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME**

Members considered items from the Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme

(a) **Service Plans from Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning Directorate**

The Head of Education Development provided a brief overview of the reports contained within the agenda pack, the five Service Improvement plans sit below the Directorate Improvement Plan and link into the Corporate Improvement Plan.

Members referred to the mention of coffee mornings for electively home-schooled children and enquired about the level of engagement. Members commented that the numbers of electively home-schooled

children was increasing and there was concern regarding the lack of monitoring and overview.

The Head of Education Development confirmed that on average, 30 to 40 families attend each session. The sessions are jointly run in partnership with health, police and Careers Wales. The college have attended sessions and provided a variety of roadshows such as knife crime, scooter safety, internet safety and learning through play which some families may not receive outside of the school system.

Members questioned what percentage of the electively home-schooled families attended the coffee morning sessions. It was noted that there was no register, and this is an issue.

The Head of Education Development advised members that the percentage of families attending from the whole home-schooled family population was unknown. Welsh Government guidance is followed and it is hoped that more families will attend in future.

Members asked for clarification on the risk assessments contained within the report, and how they are used for monitoring.

The Director of Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning confirmed that there are Service Improvement Plans for all accountable managers within the Directorate and the risks are assessed within teams. The Service Improvement Plans are aggregated into the Coordinator Service Improvement Plans, which in turn are aggregated to the Directorate Risk Register.

The member requested to meet with officers outside of the meeting for further clarification.

Following scrutiny, the report was noted.

6. **PERFORMANCE MONITORING**

There were no performance monitoring reports for consideration.

7. **SELECTION OF ITEMS FOR FUTURE SCRUTINY**

Officers advised members of new items that had been added to the Cabinet Forward Work Programme and changes to the Scrutiny

Committee Forward Work Programme; members were given the opportunity to request further items for consideration.

Members agreed to add the following items to the Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme:

- Flying Start Expansion Phase 3 – 5th December 2024
- Country Parks Car Park Review – 5th December 2024

Members noted the Forward Work Programme.

8. **URGENT ITEMS**

There were no urgent items.

Councillor R.Phillips

Chairperson