

Minutes of the Education Skills and Culture Scrutiny Committee

21 January 2021

Via Microsoft Teams

Chairperson:	Councillor S.H.Reynolds
Vice Chairperson:	Councillor R.Mizen
Councillors:	M.Crowley, S.Harris, J.Jones, S.Miller, J.D.Morgan, R.Phillips, M.Protheroe, S.Renkes, A.J.Richards, D.Whitelock and R.W.Wood
Co-opted Voting Members:	M.Caddick and A. Amor
Officers In Attendance	A.Evans, A.Thomas, C.Millis, M.Daley, P.Walker, H.Lervy, J.Woodman-Ralph and C.Davies
Cabinet Invitees:	Councillors P.A.Rees and C.Clement-Williams

1. **MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The Minutes of the previous meeting of the Education, Skills and Culture Scrutiny Committee held on the 19 November 2020, were approved.

2. **VERBAL UPDATE ON THE IMPACTS COVID-19 HAS HAD ON THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT**

Members received a verbal update on the Impacts Covid-19 has had on the Education, Skills and Culture Department. It was highlighted that the update would remain mostly on the activity during January.

It was noted that remote learning had been in existence for all Schools since 4 January 2021, however, Schools remained open for pupils of key workers and vulnerable learners. Physical attendance at

School had increased, there were 400 pupils of key workers and/or vulnerable learners in attendance the first week back of January 2021. That attendance had then increased to 1,000 pupils, which equated to 5% of the pupil population. Schools were actively encouraging those of vulnerable learners to attend school.

Officers highlighted that they hadn't yet received the operational guidance from Welsh Government regarding the opening of schools. However, had verbally updated Schools on 2 specific points relating to Social Distancing and Facial Coverings. It was noted that social distancing was deemed unnecessary for pupils in a classroom environment before the end of December 2020, however due to new variants, risk assessments had now been revised meaning it was deemed necessary for pupils to comply with social distancing in Schools, particularly Secondary Schools. Face coverings had also been deemed necessary for pupils in classrooms and communal areas in School, particularly Secondary Schools. This is based on local risk assessments. These arrangements would again be reviewed by the end of February.

It was noted that there had recently been a release in the press regarding Examination Series for Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5. Resulting in centre assessment grades which would be provided at the end of the academic year to pupils in years 10, 11, 12 and 13 where relevant. It was noted that officers were working with Schools for a consistent approach. It was mentioned that School's would become an appeal centre for those pupils or parents that may not be satisfied with the results. Officers again reassured members that they would work with schools and are awaiting guidance from Welsh Government.

Officers highlighted to members that they were meeting with Head Teachers on a daily basis to ensure the wellbeing of staff was being maintained. It was noted that Health and Wellbeing Sessions had been procured to support Head Teachers.

Discussions took place around the availability of devices for pupils and connectivity concerns. It was noted that during the first lockdown in March/April 2020, it was identified that 1,300 pupils did not have access to a device and 228 households had a lack of suitable connectivity. For those pupils that did not have access to a device and/or had connectivity issues, they were provided with a Chrome book and Mifi units.

Following the recent uptake in online learning due to lockdown restrictions, the Council had also provided Teachers with appropriate devices.

It was noted that there had been a stock delay when purchasing Chromebooks in 2020, delaying receipt of these items.

Members were made aware of lateral flow testing that was currently being piloted, Neath Port Talbot Schools had opted to not participate, due to the current pressures on schools ensuring education is a key priority.

Members received an update on the service delivery of the Inclusion Service. It was noted that the School Based Counselling Service had set up two helplines for school staff and primary pupils as well as a Supervision pilot. It was highlighted that both services were grant funded.

Curriculum reform was discussed and the importance of blended learning continuing as a key element in Schools post Covid-19.

It was noted that the Youth service had been awarded with a bronze quality mark.

Members queried whether there was the possibility of pupils having an additional year to enable them to catch up on the education that they may have missed from Covid-19.

Discussions took place around the support provided to non Welsh medium speaking parents. Officers highlight the pro-active approach they had achieved for the Schools due to the difficulties that can appear from home schooling with pupils from Welsh Medium Schools. They discussed skills that pupils had gained such as Translanguaging and the importance of this.

Members asked whether Lateral flow testing would be offered to Child Carers, Officers confirmed that they would query this outside the meeting.

Scrutiny Members and Cabinet Members commended the work of the officers.

Following Scrutiny, the update was noted.

3. **CONSULTATION ON 2021/22 BUDGET PROPOSALS**

An overview was received on the Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning draft budget proposals 2021/2022.

It was highlighted, that the proposals included within the report were a small number of saving strategies which had already been scrutinised, consulted on and were approved by Council on 6th March 2020.

Members were also provided with information on the budget pressures to the service, along with the savings, cuts and income generation opportunities which are detailed within the circulated report.

During the discussion of the budget, concern was raised over the impact that Covid-19 has had during these unprecedented times and the unpredictable impacts it has had on the Community and the budget. Members wanted reassurance that Officers were confident that their predictions for the expenditure costs wouldn't increase dramatically for the upcoming year. Officers highlighted the impacts of Covid-19 would be around for a while however, the partnership between the council and schools are strong ensuring that the actions that were being taken as well as future planning have been carefully costed. The Cabinet Member for Finance also highlighted the support that the Welsh Government has continued to provide the Council through these difficult times.

Members had concerns over the take-up of the Cleaning Service due to School Budgets. Officers reassured members that the in-house Cleaning Service has excelled itself over the past few months due to the impacts of covid-19 and is on a solid footing and in demand.

It was queried whether Margam Orangery would be able to revert back to a Wedding Venue this year, if the vaccination process were to be completed in a timely manner. Members also queried whether the loss of 279k income at Margam Orangery be funded by Welsh Government. It was noted that as soon as Margam Orangery reverts back to a venue and not a vaccination centre it will be utilised again. Officers highlighted that as mentioned previously by the Cabinet Member for Finance, Welsh Government had been very supportive and would provide support within reason.

The Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and Culture thanked Scrutiny Members for their input in to the Budget Consultation and commended Officers for their efforts.

Following Scrutiny of the budget details contained within the report, Members were reminded that their comments from this meeting would form part of the formal consultation response for the budget 2021/22. They were asked that if they had any other proposals for budget savings, not included within the attached report, that they approach Officers for their consideration.

4. **FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME 2020/21**

Members noted the Forward Work Programme.

Councillor S.H.Reynolds

Chairperson

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