

Minutes of the Education, Skills and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee

25 May 2023

Port Talbot Civic Centre / Remotely - Hybrid

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

1. **CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

It was confirmed that the committee would be scrutinising items 7, 8 and 9 from the Cabinet Board Agenda.

2. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest received.

3. **MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The minutes of the meetings held on 16th March 2023 and 13th April 2023 were approved as true and accurate records.

4. **PUPIL ATTENDANCE UPDATE**

Members considered the report as circulated within the agenda pack.

Members queried the correlation between pupils free school meal status and attendance. Officers confirmed that pupils in receipt of free school meals had poorer attendance than pupils who did not receive free school meals. Members congratulated the team on the amount of work carried out in making the correlations and looked forward to the outcomes of the work.

Members enquired if Estyn had been contacted and what was their approach to absence. Officers commented that Estyn were concerned that our Covid attendance recovery rate has been slower than other local authorities. Conversations have been held with Estyn on a number of matters, including standards, attendance and safeguarding; Estyn will discuss attendance with individual schools on a school by school basis.

Members questioned if families were continuing to take holidays outside of term time due to financial pressures. Officers advised there has not been an increase in the number of holidays taken by individual families but there has been an increase in the amount of families taking holidays during term time. However, Officers noted that Neath Port Talbot do not fine parents for taking a single holiday if attendance is otherwise good.

The report is for information and is noted.

5. **PRE-DECISION SCRUTINY**

Seren Programme

The Officer gave an overview of the report as detailed in the circulated agenda.

Members noted it was pleasing to hear of the collaboration between Neath Port Talbot Group of Colleges but queried if there was also collaboration with Gower College and College Sir Gâr? Is there a breakdown of the background and type of backgrounds of students on the programme; is funding help available and what support is in place for the culture shock that pupils may experience? Officers confirmed that work is carried out collaboratively and Neath Port Talbot are part of the South Central Wales region which also includes Swansea, Bridgend, Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Tydfil. College Sir Gâr is part of the Carmarthenshire/Ceredigion/Pembrokeshire hub and Neath Port Talbot work with them to ensure students can access sessions where appropriate. In relation to finances, there is a close relationship with the Widening Participation Team. Alumni students provide support to students throughout the process. The Seren programme is a free of charge programme available to pupils from all backgrounds, close work is undertaken with schools to support pupils if additional support is needed.

Members asked for information on the flexibility of the programme. Officers advised that students were identified by teachers and it was pupil choice whether to take up a place in the programme. In years 8 and 9, pupils can take part in opportunities informally and join the Welsh Government programme formally in year 10. Teachers will work with pupils to identify any barriers to the pupil entering the programme

Following scrutiny, members noted the item for information.

Personal Transport Budget

Officers outlined the report that was circulated with the agenda.

Members commented on the level of flexibility the proposal would bring and the potential benefits to individuals and queried if there had been any discussion with Community Transport Operators? The Officer confirmed that currently we are unable to use charity run community transport groups however community operators could become involved if they followed the procurement process. This may be a topic for future discussion, and will be taken up with colleagues in Environment.

Members questioned whether any additional funding would be incorporated into the Home to School Transport Budget in relation to the forthcoming introduction of a 20mph speed limit, which is likely to

affect operating costs. The Officer confirmed that this has been identified as an additional risk to the Home to School Transport budget and is currently under careful monitoring. Operators are concerned but currently it is unclear how costs will be affected long term.

Members queried contingency arrangements should parents' circumstances change. Officers confirmed there was no availability in the system to plan for unexpected circumstances.

Members questioned whether Transport Workers could work with pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) to enable them to travel to school by school mini bus instead of taxis, this would upskill the pupil and save money long-term. Officers confirmed that an additional Transport Worker has been employed to specifically work with pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties, and the worker has already had an impact on pupils. The Travel Training Programme works with pupils with a Statement/Individual Development Plan to support them moving on to further education and as a life skill.

Members queried the long term effect in the reduction of firms available to provide services and commented that there was a risk that some pupils may still lose out. The Officer noted that following the pandemic the situation had been difficult but hoped the situation was now stabilising; colleagues in the Environment department liaise with operators with the aim of filling all contracts, this proposal will help to fill in any gaps. Other strategies included sharing routes and doubling up on taxis. There is an option to look at current fleet vehicles.

Members asked if feedback was available from other Local Authorities who have used personal travel budgets. Officers confirmed that this system has been used in England for a number of years and Monmouth, Newport and Rhondda Cynon Taf collaborated on a very similar scheme approximately four years ago, it is shown to be popular on difficult routes and with parents where usual home to school transport options don't work for them.

Members were enthusiastic about the prospect of potentially developing an in house fleet, but asked if any other work had been carried out to look at this issue holistically. The Officer confirmed this is always an option if the circumstances present.

The Officer confirmed Transport for Wales in conjunction with Welsh Government offer free passes for pupils to access public transport. The purpose of the Travel Training programme is to enable children to have independence, so this might involve walking, cycling or using public transport.

Following scrutiny, members were supportive of the recommendations to be considered by Cabinet Board.

Increased Planned Places - Permission to consult

The Officer gave a brief overview of the report.

Members queried whether the Blaenhonddan ASD provision proposal would still have come forward if the proposal for the Swansea Valley School had been agreed. The Officer confirmed that this proposal was in addition to any earlier proposal.

Members queried the term 'non-structural reconfiguration' as used in page 70 of the report. Officers confirmed this term was in reference to utilising space within the school but making no structural changes to the school.

Members questioned whether structural changes at Ysgol Maes Y Coed, would displace any other planned spend from the capital budget. Officers confirmed that no plans have been displaced by this spending. This provision is a priority. The capital budget can be used for refurbishments but of a manageable scale for items such as new toilets and roofs.

Members asked whether the proposed ASD unit at Blaenhonddan would be overseen by the Head of the existing special school or the Head of Blaenhonddan and whether the provision could be increased to help meet the current need. Officers clarified that the ASD unit would be part of the school and would be overseen by the Head of Blaenhonddan. The unit would be an open provision available to all children in the borough with an additional learning need who meet the criteria. Admissions would be made through the Local Authority Admission Panel. Officers confirmed that they are unable to increase the provision at Blaenhonddan and an additional 16 place provision will be planned for another site within the borough.

Following scrutiny, members were supportive of the recommendations to be considered by Cabinet Board.

6. **URGENT ITEMS**

There were no urgent items.

Councillor R.Phillips

Chairperson