

Minutes of the Education, Skills and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee

28 September 2023

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

Chairperson:	Councillor R.Phillips
Councillors:	W.Carpenter, J.Henton, C.Lewis, P.A.Rees, S.Renkes, S.H.Reynolds, P.Rogers, D.Whitelock and R.W.Wood
Co-opted Voting Members:	A. Amor and M.Caddick
Officers In Attendance	C.Millis, R.Crowhurst, J.Burge, C.Davies, S.McCluskie, J.Merrifield, C.Morris, M.Thomas, K.Windsor-Brown, D.Evans and P.Chivers
Cabinet Invitees:	Councillors J.Hurley, N.Jenkins and C.Phillips

1. **CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

The chair confirmed that the committee would be scrutinising Cabinet Board agenda items 7, 12, 13 & 14

Item 12 (Cabinet Agenda)

Cllr. Rebeca Phillips – Personal - School Governor at YGG Trebannws and Pontardawe – has dispensation to speak and vote.

Cllr. Sonia Reynolds – Personal - School Governor at YGG Gwaun Cae Gurwen - has dispensation to speak and vote.

Marie Caddick – Personal - School Governor at St Joseph’s Catholic Primary School (Neath) and family member attends St Joseph’s Comprehensive School - has dispensation to speak and vote.

Adam Amor – School Governor and family member attends Ysgol Gymraeg Ystalyfera Bro Dur and YGG Rhosafan - has dispensation to speak and vote.

Cllr. James Henton – School Governor at Ysgol Tregeles - has dispensation to speak and vote.

Cllr. Phil Rogers – School Governor at Catwg Primary and Llangatwg Community School - has dispensation to speak and vote.

Cllr. Robert Wood – School Governor at Ysgol Bae Baglan - has dispensation to speak and vote.

Cllr. Peter Rees – School Governor at Crynallt Primary and Cefn Saeson Comprehensive School - has dispensation to speak and vote.

Cllr. Dave Whitelock – School Governor at Ysgol Cwm Brombil - has dispensation to speak and vote.

Cllr. Wayne Carpenter – School Governor at Melin Primary School and Gnoll Primary School. Family member works at Cefn Saeson Comprehensive School - has dispensation to speak and vote.

Item 14 (Cabinet Agenda)

Cllr. Sonia Reynolds – Trustee of Canolfan Maerdy – has dispensation to speak and vote

3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meetings held on 25th May 2023 and 6th July 2023 were approved as a true and accurate record.

4. ANNUAL REPORT 2022 - 2023

Members agreed that the Education Skills and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee note and endorse the Annual Report 2022/2023 attached at appendix 1 and commend to Council.

5. **UPDATE ON THE ROLL OUT OF UNIVERSAL PRIMARY FREE SCHOOL MEALS**

The Head of Support Services and Transformation and scrutiny committee members thanked the catering staff involved in the successful roll out of the programme.

Members enquired whether there had been any feedback from parents/guardians on the roll out. Officers confirmed that no negative feedback had been received which was a positive.

This item was noted.

6. **PRE-DECISION SCRUTINY**

Prior to pre-decision scrutiny, a member raised concern regarding the breadth of the items to be considered by the Education, Skills and Wellbeing Scrutiny committee.

The statement was noted

Increased Planned Places Blaenhonddan Primary School – Back from Consultation

Officers confirmed that this report was the second of three reports in the school re-organisation proposal and there had been limited responses to the consultation. Another report will be brought before members before the final decision is made at the end of the year.

Members asked for assurance that Maesmarchog Learning Support Centre would not close if pupil attendance numbers dropped. Officers advised members that long term assurances could not be made but confirmed that autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) numbers were increasing not decreasing. There are no plans or discussions around closures at this time but the future situation cannot be predicted.

Members asked for an estimate of transport costs. Officers advised that this would not be possible, transport costs have risen and the situation is changeable. It is not known what areas the children will travel from which could affect the costs greatly. Officers confirmed that on average taxis cost up to £350 a day but it was hoped that the introduction of the Personal Travel budget would help to lower this cost.

Members questioned whether there were plans to move qualified staff from other schools to set up the new provision, considering the difficulties in recruiting qualified support staff with ASD qualifications. Officers acknowledged that working in a unit was a more specialist role compared to mainstream classes. As part of the recruitment process, candidates will be asked for additional experience /qualifications in the field. Officers reassured members that on the opening of a new unit, a training package is put in place and transition activities are planned for the children. Staff are supported to ensure any early difficulties, lack of skills or gaps in their knowledge are filled.

Members questioned whether, non-class based staff such as taxi drivers, escorts and catering staff will receive ASD training. Officers confirmed there are two travel trainers, who work with children through transition and also specialist staff within the inclusion service. Taxi drivers and escorts are not employed by the authority so training cannot be mandatory.

Members questioned whether support staff could have the option to carry out in-house training on a voluntary basis. Officers noted this suggestion.

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

School Exclusion Update

The Head of Education Development confirmed that the report was in relation to a request from members for more information regarding all types of exclusions.

Members referred officers to paragraph 13, page 251 and sought to clarify the mention of a temporary reduction in fixed term exclusions for Special Educational Needs (SEN)/Additional Learning Needs (ALN) pupils. Officers confirmed that the temporary reduction was a data capture issue related to the change over from the previous SEN system to the new ALN system. Covid has affected the amount of referrals from schools as children's attendance has dropped. Due to the long process in certain circumstances, this temporary decrease has been flagged to ensure the figures are clear in the long term.

Members commented that during the current cost of living crisis, exclusions can be a punishment to parents as well as to the children due to parents having to take leave. Members welcomed restorative justice and thanked officers for looking at alternatives to what is a national problem.

The chair thanked the officers for their work.

Following scrutiny, members noted the item for information.

Welsh Public Library Standards Assessment 2021/2022

Members requested sight of the case studies that have been sent to Welsh Government.

Members thanked officers for a good report and noted that library services are crucial to our education system and communities and should be supported going forward.

Following scrutiny, members noted the item for information.

Quarter 1 Performance Indicators 23/24 – Education Directorate

Officers advised members that some of the graph representation in the report is presented in a new format, some of the graphs will provide a clearer picture at the end of the 4th quarter.

Members referred to page 292 of the report and the 12 month rent free arrangement for Welsh Language Childcare provisions. Members noted that the number of places in Welsh/bilingual facilities has increased whilst the number in English medium provisions has decreased and questioned whether the rent free system will be rolled out to English medium provisions.

Officers confirmed that this arrangement is subject to review and a future roll out to English provisions may be an option for consideration. Officers advised members that early intervention to raise attendance at Welsh medium childcare provisions is part of the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP) and has had a positive impact on attendance at Welsh medium primary schools. Officers noted that often Welsh medium childcare provisions are in isolated areas where numbers are small and it is difficult for businesses to make the facilities viable. Any decrease in the amount of Welsh child care provisions would have a negative impact on the WESP.

Members expressed concern that many childcare providers are struggling currently and there needs to be consideration concerning advantage in some areas and fair competition.

Members referred to page 292 of the report and asked for clarification on the type of youth interaction that has increased. Officers confirmed that interaction has increased in all areas and a further breakdown can be provided if required. Since Covid has lessened, young people are more willing to engage in activities. Where there is awareness that a young person may not move on to employment or training, a catch up is carried out. There is a dedicated homeless worker within the youth service.

Members asked for clarification of the criteria for accessing help through the Communities for Work Plus programme. Officers confirmed that this area will be covered as part of the work on employability that is included on the Forward Work Programme. Members were pleased to hear that more young people were attending youth centres, but raised concern over young people gathering in town centres, parks and public places with involvement in gangs, county lines and drug addiction. Members asked for information on outreach youth workers and what support they could give. Officers confirmed that whilst youth workers carry out work in this area, they are complimented by the Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) team and Cynnydd workers. Further work would be required before a complete overview could be given. The Chair requested this information be brought back to a future committee.

Following scrutiny, the item was noted.

7. **COMMITTEE ACTION LOG**

This item was noted.

8. **FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME 2023/24**

This item was noted.

9. **URGENT ITEMS**

There were no urgent items.

Councillor R.Phillips

Chairperson