

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE LEARNING AND SKILLS SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE HELD AT COUNCIL CHAMBER, COUNTY HALL - COUNTY HALL ON
FRIDAY, 19 JULY 2019**

PRESENT

County Councillor P Roberts (Chairman)

County Councillors B Davies, S C Davies, D R Jones, K Laurie-Parry and L Roberts

Parent Governor Representatives: Mrs A Davies, Mrs S. Davies and G Robson

Church Representative: Mrs M Evitts,

County Councillor A W Davies (Portfolio Holder for Finance)

In attendance:

E Towns (Senior Challenge Advisor), J Spraggon (Finance Business Partner), S Caple (Deputy Head of Financial Services), K Watts (Customer Services Manager) and E Patterson (Scrutiny Officer)

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| 1. APOLOGIES |
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Apologies for absence were received from County Councillors G Breeze, E Roderick, G Thomas, Portfolio Holder M Alexander, C Turner (Chief Executive and Director of Education) and Dr A Clark (Head of Schools Service)

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| 2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST |
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Declarations of interest were received from County Councillors S Davies, D Jones and B Davies and Parent Governor Representative A Davies as School Governors whose schools have or may have received grant income this financial year.

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| 3. DECLARATIONS OF PARTY WHIP |
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No declarations of party whips were received.

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| 4. SCHOOLS SERVICE FINANCE |
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The Finance Business Manager introduced the paper outlining the Schools Service projected outturn at 31 March 2020 as at Quarter 1 (30th June 2019).

The Schools Service is projecting at £669k overspend at year end the main reasons for which are a series of unachieved savings. The Finance team are working closely with the Schools Service to help achieve the required savings.

The Schools Service undertakes a range of work such as the 21st Century School programme, Post 16 review, school transport. There is a concern regarding the lack of join up and capacity of staff to support these programmes. The cuts are also concerning impacting on the capacity of Schools Service staff to support schools.

The Senior Challenge Advisor confirmed the reduced number of staff within the Schools Service is a concern, particularly in the area of school modernisation which is under capacity. The Schools Service is receiving support from the corporate transformation team in this area of work. The service knows what needs to be done to make the required savings and just needs capacity to be able to carry this out.

Where is the overspend funded from?

This is funded from corporate reserves, and other areas may be underspent which may assist in balancing the councils position overall. The Finance Team are working with the service to make the savings required.

Is the service confident the savings will be made?

Since the report was written a further £117k savings have been made (from additional money received from the Education Improvement Grant and some savings identified within the Freedom contract).

The report identified £250k of savings from within the ALN budget. Given the ALN budget is £5million is this realistic?

This is not specifically for a reduction in ALN provision but could be for example for the reduction of costs in expensive out of county placements or increased income.

What are the trends in this area? Members are hearing that other council departments have been slow in returning results in this area.

This information can be provided.

The Portfolio Holder noted that there would be a change in the way of reporting this information. Cabinet would be receiving a monthly report on savings delivered to date and how likely or otherwise it was that the remaining savings would be made.

The Deputy Head of Financial Services confirmed the intention of this paper was to demonstrate that savings are achieved throughout the year and without this information the position in the first part of the year looks bad but does improve as the year progresses.

Why does the paper state it in respect of ALN spend this is unpredictable? It should be possible to estimate these costs.

This is one of the issues affecting the forecast and is identified as a risk.

Why is the education budget subsidising child-care settings (under the Capital Grants section)?

This is specific grant funding from Welsh Government and is not subsidised by the authorities education budget. The child-care settings are managed from within the education service.

When does Band B funding cease? When will dates be shared for the Welsh Medium school in Newtown?

Band B funding ceases in 2023/24 although there is some flexibility around this. The Portfolio Holder for Finance confirmed the Cabinet had been looking at the future footprint of schools and would be sharing this information with scrutiny.

When will this programme be progressed?

The Portfolio Holder for Finance advised that the data would be shared this year with decisions expected next Spring.

Is there sufficient capacity to progress this programme?

Additional capacity is to be provided.

There appears to be a common thread within the report of savings not being realised including within areas such as school swimming, school houses. The report does not appear to demonstrate any urgency to achieve the savings. Councillors found budget setting this year to be extremely difficult and unless the savings identified during that budget round are made the position next year will be similarly difficult.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance confirmed that the savings figures outlined within the report need to be made by the Schools Service. Savings not made at the end of year will not go away.

Was the £100k saving attributed to school swimming part of the Freedom Contract saving agreed during the budget process and if so why did Members not know that this had not been agreed and is still under negotiation?

To be provided.

Is the figure for school houses an overspend or a non-achievement of income?

This is achievement of income. Future reports will provide additional narrative

The staffing review shows an overspend of £18k due to an extension of timescales for consultation. Where will this saving be found?

Savings that are delayed will still need to be found from elsewhere within the service until they are fully met in the next financial year when a full year saving is achieved.

The Youth Service shows an overspend due of £16k due to 'unders and overs'. What does this mean?

Unders and overs are used when there are a lot of low level under and over spends which do not relate to a specific issue. The maximum this would relate to is £1k and is not staffing related.

What does the £120k for school closures in 2019/20 relate to?

This was a saving identified however, under school transformation schools did not close and therefore this saving has not been achieved.

What is the saving in ALN relating to?

The ALN team would be able to provide this information.

When is the grant offer for Gwernyfed outlined in the 21st Century Schools summary expected?

It is understood this has been received.

Members expressed concern regarding how realistic the efficiencies are for this year? For example Youth Services budget has been drastically cut but is still showing an overspend.

The Head of Service comments advise that Warning Notices have been issued. Does the Schools Service have the capacity to support schools in this situation?

The Schools Service have finite capacity and work is prioritised. Schools with Warning Notices are given named officer support from HR, Finance and the Schools Service. This work would take priority.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance advised a permanent Schools Finance Manager had been appointed which would give stability to the service.

Are schools who are required to receive additional pupils on appeal funded for these additional pupils?

Schools funding is calculated on a count of pupils on roll on the Friday following the October half term prior to the start of the school year. Changes to the numbers on roll from September are not reflected in that years calculation but would be counted for the following years allocation. This can lead to challenges for schools in this position and these schools will receive support from the Finance and Schools Teams.

Recommended that:

- **the scrutiny sessions monitoring the Schools Service Budget be timetabled to enable the savings paper provided to Cabinet to be considered.**
- **Clarity be provided regarding the capacity required and available to undertake school transformation at the pace that has been identified**
- **Further detail be provided on the timeline for the Freedom Leisure savings**
- **Future reports include additional narrative**
- **Consideration is given to how Co-opted Members are kept informed of the budget process so that all Members of Committee are able to carry out effective budget scrutiny**

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| 5. COMPLAINTS, COMPLIMENTS AND COMMENTS |
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The Customer Services Manager presented the report 'Schools Service, Complaints, Compliments and Comments' (copy filed with signed minutes).

The report covered the period June 2018 to May 2019. Complaints are considered under a two stage process. Both stages are usually undertaken within the service area with the second stage being carried out by either a Senior Officer from within the service area, an independent Officer from another service area or an external investigator. Twenty three complaints were received of which 5 proceeded to Stage two of the process.

It is necessary to respond to complaints within 20 working days and 73% of complaints were responded to within this timescale.

Can the outcome of the complaints detailed in Table 2 be included for future reports.

This can be provided.

How does the service learn from complaints?

The Senior Challenge Advisor confirmed that he had acted as Investigating Officer in the past. Learning is shared with the Head of Service and Officer to ensure that mistakes are not repeated. A tracker is kept by the Head of Service.

What happens when complaints are not upheld and yet the complainant remains unsatisfied?

The next stage would be for the complainant to make a complaint to the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales. The PSOW does not advise the Customer Services Department that a complaint has been received. Notification of a complaint received by the PSOW would be sent to the Monitoring Officer.

If 73% of complaints were responded to in time that means 27% weren't. Can information be provided as to why these deadlines were missed.

The Customer Services Manager confirmed that her team did chase the service for responses when it was getting near a deadline and when any were outstanding. There is a Corporate Objective to respond to 100% of complaints within 20 days. The average time across the organisation is 79%.

To enable trends to be tracked can it be agreed that the year follows a standard time.

The timeframe would normally be April to March.

What opportunities are there for schools' complaints to be appealed?

Governing Bodies have a two-stage process to consider complaints. The appeal of any complaints would be made to the Schools Service, not to the Customer Services Team.

Has there been any post inspection feedback?

Estyn have shared their preliminary findings with the Chief Executive, Head of Schools and nominee. The Leader, Portfolio Holder for Education and Scrutiny Chair will receive a briefing on 2nd August 2019 when purdah has finished.

Cllr B Davies left 3.50pm

There have been no compliments for this service. Is this unusual?

Far fewer compliments are received. The whole of the authority only received 185 compliments.

Resolved that future reports to contain:

- 1. Detail is provided on the which of the complaints detailed in Table 2 were upheld or not**
- 2. Information from the Monitoring Officer regarding any complaints received by the PSOW**
- 3. Information as to why complaints were responded to late and how late the response was**
- 4. That the timeframe for this report be standardised to April to March to allow for trend analysis**

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| 6. | CHAIR'S BRIEFING |
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All matters had been covered in other parts of the agenda.

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| 7. | APPOINTMENT TO WORKING GROUPS |
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Resolved that the following Members be appointed to Working Groups:

- 1. School Deficit Budgets – Cllr P Roberts, Cllr S Davies, Vacancy**
- 2. Transformation/Major Change Projects – Cllr P Roberts, Cllr D Jones, Cllr L Roberts**

It was agreed to ask absent Members if they wished to take the vacancy on the School Deficit Budgets working group.

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| 8. | ERW JOINT SCRUTINY GROUP |
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The ERW Representatives Parent Governor A Davies and Cllr S Davies presented the report adding that they had been disappointed with the progress made despite the aspirations that had been outlined. Cllr S Davies had met with Estyn Inspectors who had visited ERW. The Inspectors are keeping a watch on ERW as it was behind the other regions in making improvements.

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| 9. | RESPONSES TO SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATIONS |
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The response to the Schools Budgets observations was attached.

Members were disappointed with the response to recommendation 4 – the issue was with the decision to create a new school which showed a deficit position rather than with the school in their attempts to deal with the same.

The Senior Challenge Advisor confirmed the Formula Review Group met on 12th July 2019.

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| 10. | WORK PROGRAMME |
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The work programme outlined in the agenda was noted. Additional dates for a briefing on school data in September and the Estyn Inspection in October would be timetabled. Working Group meetings also needed to be timetabled.

County Councillor P Roberts (Chairman)