

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE LEARNING AND SKILLS SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE HELD AT ON MONDAY, 1 FEBRUARY 2021**

PRESENT: County Councillor P Roberts (Chairman)
County Councillors B Davies, S C Davies, D R Jones, L Roberts, R G Thomas,
K M Roberts-Jones, M Weale.
Co-Opted Members Mrs A Davies, Mrs S. Davies, Mrs M Evitts and G Robson

Cabinet Portfolio Holders In Attendance: County Councillors P Davies (Portfolio Holder for Education and Property) and A W Davies (Portfolio Holder for Finance and Transport)

Officers: Caroline Turner (Chief Executive), Geraint Rees (Education Consultant), Wyn Richards (Scrutiny Manager and Head of Democratic Services), Marianne Evans (Senior Manager - Education Services), Emma Palmer (Head of Transformation and Communications), Clive Pinney (Head of Legal and Democratic Services) and Jane Thomas (Head of Finance)

1. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was received from County Councillor E. Roderick.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest from Members relating to items for consideration on the agenda.

3. DECLARATIONS OF PARTY WHIP

The Committee did not receive any disclosures of prohibited party whips which a Member has been given in relation to the meeting in accordance with Section 78(3) of the Local Government Measure 2011.

4. CALL IN OF CABINET DECISION - LLANFAIR CAEREINION C.P. SCHOOL AND CAEREINION HIGH SCHOOL
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Documents Considered:

- Call-In Request by the Chair of the Committee
- Call-In Notice
- Cabinet Report – Llanfair Caereinion C.P. School and Caereinion High School – All-age School Proposal.

Issues Discussed:

- The Chair advised the Committee that the reason the decision had been called in was that the agreed process for scrutiny to review consultation reports prior to their consideration by Cabinet had not been followed in this instance.
- The Monitoring Officer advised the Committee that this was not an ordinary scrutiny process. The Committee's role was to consider the Cabinet report in relation to the issues for the call-in and if the Committee continued to have concerns regarding the decision then it could refer the report back to the Cabinet for further consideration.

- The Committee was advised that the proposal before Cabinet was related to creating an all through school rather than considering the language category of the school.
- The Welsh Medium provision referred to in the report was designed to provide support for Welsh Medium provision in the Severn Valley rather than establish a Welsh Medium provision in the Severn Valley area.
- The Committee was reminded that it had considered the proposals for the Transformation Programme and workstreams and the strategic aim to develop a network of all age schools based around the 13 current secondary schools locations in Powys in June 2020.
- In relation to the consultation exercise, information about the consultation was made available to a wide number of schools in the area who were able to respond to the consultation. Welsh Government regulations do not require the Council to undertake consultations. However, the Council has decided to consult with those schools named in the proposal and not with other schools.
- The comments from consultees following the consultation exercise together with the responses were considered by the Cabinet and are included in the consultation report.
- Whilst there is a small saving arising from the proposal, the key aim of the proposal is improving the educational opportunity for learners in Llanfair Caereinion.
- If in future it becomes necessary to change the language category of the school, then a further statutory process is required.

- Questions:

<p>The claims within the proposal do not stand up. They do not address or resolve the large number of small schools, decreasing numbers of pupils and building condition as well as the Welsh Language issue. How will curriculum opportunities be improved or improve the facilities for pupils</p>	<p>There are several layers to the Well-Being and Future Generations Act. The most important aim to address is that all schools are able to progress with the development of the new curriculum. The all age schools network has highlighted the strength of all age schools in planning the new curriculum. The new curriculum has Future Generations and Well-Being built into it as one of its ambitions.</p>
<p>How can the curriculum be met fully with smaller number of high school pupils in both languages. Will this not lead to a reduced curriculum choice.</p>	<p>This is a challenge around all secondary sites in Powys. The level of collaboration is different to previously, and the key issue around choice happens at the ages of 14 and 16. This challenge of funding choice is post 14 and post 16 and this is the subject of ongoing dialogue.</p>
<p>What is meant by the network of all age schools and the educational principles which are the basis of the proposal.</p>	<p>This is a question about the strategy rather than the proposal under consideration. The network of schools is to ensure an equity of provision in the county and the</p>

	proposal is one step in achieving that aim.
<p>Are we aiming at making all high schools in Powys part of an all age school.</p> <p>There is little evidence of support for an all age school in Llanfair Caereinion.</p>	<p>The Strategy aim is to establish 11 new all age schools by 2030. The two schools had asked the Council to undertake this amalgamation. The proposal does not also resolve the issue of Welsh Medium education in the Severn Valley.</p> <p>Although the Council's aim is to establish all age schools in areas, each area is different, and the Llanfair Caereinion area has a variety of schools, small schools, Welsh, English Medium or dual language schools, Church and Community schools. These schools will be considered at a later point in the process.</p> <p>The important issue in consultation reports is to clearly express the comments and issues raised from the consultation and the responses to those comments. The statistical information e.g. in relation to a particular option, is only an indication of opinions.</p>
<p>Why was a larger consultation exercise not undertaken e.g. for the whole area, if responses to the consultation suggested that this should have happened rather than having to revisit this again in the future.</p>	<p>It was decided to take a phased response to this area, and it was decided to establish the all age school first. Although this is a step in the development of Welsh Medium education for the area, it would require further consultation prior to a further proposal being made.</p> <p>This decision does not preclude further decisions being taken in the future.</p>
<p>Could there be an informal engagement with the governors of cluster schools in a high school catchment in future.</p>	<p>The consultation is open to anyone. There is no capacity within the Council for individual engagement sessions with feeder schools, but one informal consultation session for all feeder schools could be considered.</p>
<p>There are around 18% vacant places in primary schools and around 25% vacant places in secondary schools in North Powys. Does the development of a dual language school in Llanfair Caereinion hinder the development</p>	<p>The new requirements for the new WESP have only recently been received by the Council and the new WESP will be prepared now these new requirements are known. The Council will have to inform Welsh Government on progress with the</p>

<p>of a Welsh Medium Secondary School in North Powys and how does the proposal link to the current WESP which has been approved by the Cabinet and Welsh Government.</p>	<p>current WESP. The Council will take account of the comments raised in the consultation in the ongoing discussion regarding Welsh Language development at Llanfair Caereinion.</p>
<p>In setting up an all age school, this will also be a bilingual school. Are the Portfolio Holder and officers confident that the school will be viable within the funding package and how will the allocation of funding streams be guaranteed for both primary and secondary elements of the school.</p>	<p>There will be one governing body following this change, who will work on a combined budget and the governing body is responsible for ensuring that every child has what they need during their educational journey. Experience from the other two all age schools currently in Powys is that budgets are distributed equally, and no areas of concern have been raised with the Service. The proposal is for a school that will be no less viable than two separate schools. Viability is a key element of any proposal as the Council moves to creating more all age schools.</p>
<p>As this will be a relatively small school even following amalgamation with small numbers in both Welsh and English mediums, what assurances are there that the school will be able to deliver the breadth of curriculum by comparison to other schools in the area.</p>	<p>Based on information currently available, Llanfair Caereinion School is drawing in pupils from Welshpool and Newtown and outside of the immediate area. Changing the language status of the school would be the subject of a further statutory consultation and notice. There is also further work to do around the catchment area and the primary schools in the area.</p>
<p>Does the Council have evidence of the benefits of an all through school from the existing schools in the county, as it would have been helpful to see that evidence in the document.</p>	<p>Yes the Council does have that evidence.</p>
<p>How is this proposal going to deliver the current WESP and the establishment of a Welsh Medium High School in North Powys. There is little financial or educational benefits from this proposal and there are other options which have not been considered.</p>	<p>This is outside the limits of the Call-In as it deals with the future of the Welsh Language in the Severn Valley. Previous proposals such as relating to Bro Hyddgen as well as the current proposal, are attempting to move the Council forward in relation to the WESP. However, there is a need for further dialogue in developing Welsh Language proposals in the county.</p>

The Committee made the following additional points in relation to the proposal:

- There is a need to give schools a little more certainty than being a stop gap in a journey.
- Whilst it is accepted that this is part of a longer continuum a wider transformation exercise should have been undertaken. There is not enough of a short term benefit from this decision or that it will be beneficial for this school having a clear future.
- Change on a short term basis will not help staff and pupils in school.
- There has been much animosity about this decision especially from the feeder schools. A short term decision is not educationally helpful and there is a need for a more long term decision. The decision will not achieve what it sets out to achieve.
- While we need to do something, it is of concern that we are merging these schools at this point, and what have we been doing about schools in the area. The secondary school deficit is £47k which will be written off and against a saving of £12 per year this will take in effect 4 years to clear. This proposal needs to be wider than the two schools.
- Not confident that this is ambitious enough. Too many unanswered questions

On being put to a vote it was agreed by 6 votes to 5 that the decision be referred back to the Cabinet for further consideration.

Scrutiny's observations and recommendations for consideration by the Cabinet are set out below.

Scrutiny make the following observations:

- Scrutiny are concerned about the educational viability of the school following the amalgamation of the two schools, with the new remaining dual stream this will leave it with approximately 200 pupils in each stream. This raises significant concerns about the ability of the school to deliver a comprehensive offer at post 14 and post 16 in either language;
- The Committee welcome the acknowledgement by officers that this decision is a progress step in the transformation process, and that this decision does not preclude the school being subject to further transformation or linguistic changes in the future. However, we note that this is not explicitly stated in the cabinet report. Scrutiny has concerns that this may be taken as an indication that this is a settled position which could then be exploited in future consultations. Moreover, Scrutiny are concerned that this will create uncertainty over the schools future so would have expected to see more clarity as the roadmap for the school at this time.
- The Committee questioned whether as this was a short term measure, there would be sufficient benefit arising from the amalgamation on the short term basis prior to the full review of the area would take place during 2022-23.
- The Committee expressed concern and urge Cabinet to undertake clear consideration of:
 - Whether that, in the absence of a public meeting, the engagement process sufficiently included input from all the feeder schools rather than just the two schools concerned. As indicated in the papers the combining of the schools has benefits for transition for pupils of the primary school that will not be afforded to other local schools so the decision clearly affects those feeder schools. So for the council not to offer a digital meeting for those parents does raise questions as to how fully the impacts have been explored and full consultation achieved.

- That the proposal creates a continuum of upheaval within the school that could have been avoided by a decision that showed more ambition in respect of the transformation process. Officers identified that the wider cluster review will take place 2022-3 with a likely implementation date of Sept 24 or 25. This could result in pupils and staff at the schools being subject to the uncertainty of two processes should the school become part of any wider federation model or further merger that could have been avoided had there been wider consultation and transformation at this time.
- That the proposal does not align with the Council's current WESP 2017-2022 which identifies the establishment of a Welsh medium school in the Newtown area and would not in the Committee's view progress the Council's aims in developing Welsh Language provision in North Powys. The committee are specifically concerned that the separation of the change of language categorisation will require a further process and the commitment to moving along the language continuum in the report is weak and lacking in clear guarantee. Scrutiny notes that proposals for post 16 and Welsh language policy have still to be presented to Cabinet and therefore have concerns that the establishment of an all through school in the absence of this policy may be detrimental to the wider aims of both the current and evolving WESP and would urge caution in making a decision in the absence of these policies.
- As previously noted the proposal would not in any way address the size of the cohorts entering the high school or contribute the aims of the transformation program to reduce excess capacity within the wider education system particularly at KS3 and above. As such we have to question whether the proposal would assist in the long term develop both Welsh Medium and English Medium education in Llanfair Caereinion.
- That as a short term measure the proposal would be unsettling for staff, parents and pupils instead of delay and a comprehensive review this could have an ongoing impact over 3 to 5 years of constant change and uncertainty with an impact on the educational performance of pupils.
- That the current overspend by the high school (£47k) which would be written off by the Council if the proposal proceeded would in effect take 4 years to be paid based on the proposed saving of £12k per year by the amalgamation of the two schools a timescale in which further changes are likely.
- That the proposal would not achieve the aims set out in the report to the Cabinet such as improving the building condition, addressing reductions in pupil numbers, challenging financial pressures, providing attractive post 16 education and providing a comprehensive curriculum in a small school where every year group is bilingual.

Scrutiny Recommendations:

- 1 That the decision regarding Llanfair Caereinion C.P. School and Caereinion High School be referred back to the Cabinet for further consideration for the reasons set out above.**
- 2. In addition, we would make the following recommendations in respect of the ongoing transformation agenda**
 - (a) That a virtual/physical meeting is convened specifically for parents and governors within the cluster where a change to a high school may impact upon cluster primaries**
 - (b) That the council bring forward the remaining policy papers that will underpin the wider transformation including but not limited to the Welsh language and Post 16 as a matter of urgency so that all proposals can be evaluated by scrutiny in respect of those**

- (c) that the decision if reapproved should be modified to include a clause making it clear that the new school may be involved in future transformations**

County Councillor P Roberts (Chairman)