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Learning and Skills Scrutiny Committee Monday, 8 July 2019

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE LEARNING AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD AT COUNCIL CHAMBER, COUNTY HALL - COUNTY HALL ON MONDAY, 8 JULY 2019

PRESENT

County Councillor P Roberts (Chairman)

County Councillors G Breeze, B Davies, S C Davies, D R Jones, K Laurie-Parry,
E Roderick, L Roberts and R G Thomas,
Parent Governor Representatives Mrs A Davies, Mrs S. Davies and G Robson
Church Representative Mrs M Evitts,

In attendance:

County Councillors M Alexander (Portfolio Holder for Education) and A Davies
(Portfolio Holder for Finance).

C Turner (Chief Executive and Director of Education), A Clark (Head of
Education), M Evans (Senior Manager School Transformation), E Palmer (Head
of Strategy, Performance and Transformation Programme), (Sarah Astley
(Schools Transformation and Welsh-Medium Education Programme Manager), S
Ling (Communications and Engagement Officer) and E Patterson (Scrutiny
Officer).

1.	APOLOGIES
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No apologies for absence were received.

2.	DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST
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No declarations of interest were received.

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

4.	MINUTES
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The Chair was authorised to sign the minutes of the meeting held on the 24th
May 2019 as a correct record subject to the following amendment:

On page 10 the range of cost per pupil in the primary sector should read £4,700.

5.	REVIEW OF SIXTH FORM PROVISION POWYS 2019
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The Senior Manager School Transformation presented the report draft report
'Review of Sixth Form Provision 2019'.

Attention was drawn to the vicious circle that had developed with falling learner numbers leading to and decline in grant funding leading to a constrainer offer leading to falling learner numbers. There has been a significant fall in numbers in recent years, retention rates are low and falling, there are a conservative estimate of 500 pupils travelling out of county to access Post 16 education, collaboration to date has not halted the decline.

Cllr M Alexander and C Turner join the meeting 14.20

The Welsh Medium offer does not meet the requirements agreed in the Powys Welsh in Education Service Plan, standards are an issue and the current system is broken or very close to being broken.

The case for change has been made and this is recommended to be in the form of a three stage approach:

- Stage 1 (initial recommendations) including new branding, a new marketing campaign and an increased digital offer.
- Stage 2 – an engagement exercise with stakeholders
- Stage 3 – Report and business case to Cabinet with final recommendations

Parallel to this a review of sixth form funding is required and will be undertaken by the Funding Formula Review Group.

The move to digital learning is welcomed with the potential to keep sixth form bases open providing pastoral care. However, it is necessary to review secondary school concurrently as there will be potential impacts on this sector as a result of the post 16 review.

The service are working with Ceredigion to introduce e-sgol and the digital kit has been provided to start this in September 2019. This will be an early indicator of the way forward but it will be necessary to monitor the quality of provision and outcomes.

The Post 16 review is being undertaken separately from a review of Secondary provision because the service have learnt from past experiences of school reviews that achievability is important. It is the Post 16 sector that is in crisis and is unsustainable and needs urgent review.

Has the service looked abroad, for example Australia, to see how digital learning can be applied?

There is a lot of information on providing digital learning within Wales at university level. The issue will be how the sixth forms embrace digital learning. Welsh Government are investing in digital learning over the next few years and a number of key components are in place now.

The Portfolio Holder noted that the digital agenda is being adopted by schools on a proactive basis.

The evidence for digital learning is not coming across within the report and the decisions being made are not supported by evidence within the report.

Why is it obvious that Scotland is evidenced for digital learning? Do Powys schools have the equipment and digital connectivity to support digital learning?

Scotland have been using digital learning for some time.

Not all of Powys has the equipment but Welsh Government are committing a significant investment to digital learning. The Director of Transformation has signed the letter of intent in this regard.

Suitable broadband connections are not within the gift of the local authority to arrange.

There is more broadband capacity within the county than is being currently used.

The next stage is to work out what is needed and where it is needed.

Digital learning will not be suitable for all subjects but it can provide opportunities and it would be wrong not to take advantage of it.

Is the digital infrastructure in schools good enough at present?

It will be necessary to work out what is good enough and where the WG grant funding will need to be used to put additional kit in. The components have been tested but if it is the intention to deliver a wider curriculum more investigation will be required.

The Portfolio Holder confirmed the service have worked with schools to see which schools are confident to deliver digital learning and the offer is based on this. It is not a full curriculum.

Pupils in Year 11 are choosing options now. Is the digital offer available in all 12 sixth forms?

The subjects that have been found to be deliverable are included in the option blocks for 2019/20.

The Portfolio Holder noted that in some cases schools offer courses to attract pupils which at the beginning of the school year are pulled due to a lack of numbers.

Can it be confirmed all schools are able to offer access to digital learning?

The results of the digital testing can be made available.

What digital courses are offered?

It was confirmed that each school was offering one course digitally.

If all schools can offer the digital curriculum what will the WG grant be spent on?

This will be used to provide improved delivery suites, screens etc and to allow for the provision of an increased digital offer.

A Member advised that he had received a demonstration of digital learning in a local high school and the school senior leadership team had been enthusiastic regarding this project.

What has been the outcome of the pilot of digital learning at AS level?

This is where external provision is purchased and this year two subjects have been run via Tute Teach. The outcomes will be known when the AS results are published. The difference with the digital learning programme is that learning is kept within schools.

One of the aims of the Post 16 review is to reduce student travel. Students do not mind travelling to study as evidenced by the numbers attending out of county provision but are averse to intra-day travel, as evidenced by the findings of the learner survey. What is proposed to reflect this position?

In the short term intra-school travel will still be necessary. It is accepted that many learners are prepared to travel further because of reasons such as perceived offer, quality, choice and perhaps others. In trying to provide local access to post 16 provision in Powys it has been necessary to move to a system of intra-school travel. Some students are happy to travel to access a subject of choice, other students decide to take second choice subjects.

The Head of Schools offered some context in relation to standards. As so many pupils are lost to other provision it is difficult to look at standards. It is likely that the full range of abilities attend other provision and therefore it is difficult to judge if standards are at the right level.

The Portfolio Holder noted that although there is an assumption that pupils access alternative provision for reasons of choice there are some students that choose to go and study subjects that are available locally. The subjects students choose also need careful comparison. For example top grades in subjects such as further maths should not be compared to easier subjects.

Members noted there is a balance for sixth form admissions tutors between maintaining numbers of pupils and maintaining standards with the stringency of entrance requirements affecting both these factors.

Members expressed disappointment with the report as presented and whilst the recommendations were welcomed and the team congratulated it had been expected that this report would have presented firm recommendations which have been delayed. The matters outlined in the report have already been discussed in the schools. Why is it necessary to wait until Spring 2020 for recommendations when the Sixth form crisis has already been discussed publicly? Can scrutiny be assured that any changes proposed will be linked to changes to High Schools?

What is proposed is a radical change. The Senior Manager School Transformation was of the opinion that having been through school reorganisation before it is best to treat Post 16 separately as it is important to take the community with us. If this doesn't happen the community will be scared and oppose proposals. It will be necessary to engage with young people and communities to see what is needed. Scrutiny will make recommendations regarding this report and this could include a recommendation in respect of the pace of change.

The Head of Schools noted the service had limited capacity in the School Transformation team and were preparing a bid for increased capacity which it was hoped would be successful.

In the past money has been taken from the schools' service to protect delegated school funding. Has this been cut too much?

The Head of Schools advised that funding has not been cut from the Transformation team as it is a small team anyway. It may be that resource is purchased from other teams in the authority.

The Head of Transformation advised that the corporate transformation team has already gone through a restructure and additional resource has been found. It is known that the Schools Transformation team need additional resource and it will be possible to use capital receipts for this transformation.

Does the schools service have the capacity to undertake the ALN Transformation review?

The service had successfully bid for Management of Change funding and additional support had been provided for this review.

The reasons for undertaking a standalone Post 16 review are unconvincing. Decisions have been made recently (for example and all-through school at Llanfyllin) which will be difficult to unravel and will open the authority to criticism. These views may form part of scrutiny recommendations to Cabinet. The team do not have the capacity to make the changes that are needed. There is one staff member, part of the time of the Senior Manager School Transformation and a contribution from the Corporate Transformation Team.

A Member was appalled by small size of this team and gave credit for the work that the team had produced.

The Head of Strategy, Performance and Reorganisation Programmes noted that this had been identified in the new operating model which was why she was attending this session. Her team were working on data for all Powys pupils both in and out of county including data on:

- free school meals,
- surplus places,
- population,
- school attainment,
- school attended by pupil compared to catchment school
- building condition etc.

The initial work has been completed and will be shared with the Senior Leadership Team and Portfolio Holder. It will then be possible for the Transformation Team to undertake modelling.

The Chair welcomed the opportunity for scrutiny to consider this data.

The Head of Strategy, Performance and Reorganisation Programmes advised that this would take some time but that a briefing could be arranged once this information has been shared with Cabinet.

The Portfolio Holder advised that £2million had been taken out of Schools Services to protect school budget. It is not appropriate to complain now that we chose to keep money in schools. She warned that whilst the data was crucial and would drive decisions it was essential that the legal requirements of the School Organisation Code are observed to ensure that decisions are not overturned.

How are schools teaching pupils in two streams?

There are four schools which combine classes between years 12 and 13 or some schools choose to teach pupils in both English and Welsh. There are concerns regarding this as it is difficult to teach a subject in two languages, but this is the reality of what the dual stream schools are facing.

The Portfolio Holder observed that some of the most effective bi-lingual teaching is in practical subjects such as DT, Art or Music. It is not what the authority would choose to offer but it may be that there is an option to offer Celf/Art in a bilingual class or not at all.

The learner survey notes that those pupils who do not consider Post 16 provision suitable for their needs cite there is no or poor support for pupils with a disability notably dyslexia. How is the service addressing this?

This will be addressed as part of the new ALN bill.

The retention rates outlined within the report show a large variation. If the retention rates at of the two schools with the highest rates were replicated across the county there would be no need for this review as all the sixth forms would be sustainable.

The Head of Schools observed that one of the schools with the highest retention rate was one of the largest schools and had the best offer. Some of the variations in retention rates are geographical in that some schools are in areas that have better access to the English system. There has been much debate around the Welsh Bacalaureate and the compunction for Welsh Students to study this. This may be a factor in students choosing to study in the English system.

2018	Yr 11-12 to Sixth Form	Yr 12-13 in Sixth Form	Yr 11-12 to College
Powys	42%	86%	45%
All Wales	46%		53%

Therefore in Powys 14% of Sixth Form students do not complete their final year.

The Portfolio Holder observed that Sixth Form is not the right destination for all pupils and other routes such as apprenticeships will suit some pupils.

The socio-economic background also varies across the county and it may be that some pupils choose to go straight into employment. It is also necessary to look at what is provided locally. For example Agriculture through the medium of Welsh is not offered within Powys and therefore students are having to attend Coleg Cambria – Llysfasi to access this course.

The Portfolio Holder commented that schools could offer a large range of subjects but when the school term started and pupils had been admitted to sixth form some of these offers were withdrawn through lack of numbers. The data that is being produced will help to ascertain a full picture.

Members noted that further work was needed to understand why pupils were not staying on and why some schools had better retention rates than others.

The Head of Schools cautioned that some data is not within the remit of the local authority. Some young people choose to leave after AS level as they find A levels difficult and require a high level of personal commitment to achieve. A different system operates in England which this authority does not have access to.

If as is outlined in the report the authorities view is that 180 are required to make a sixth form viable then there is only one viable sixth form in Powys. Can it be confirmed that this review will be undertaken on the basis of what is best for pupils rather than on the grounds of cost or political expediency.

The Portfolio Holder noted that the authority had to live within their means, that any changes proposed had to be evidenced and had to be demonstrably good for learners. If this review is not well prepared it will fail.

Will the review be completed within the political term which ends in May 2022?

It was confirmed that the timetable would allow for this and was reasonable. However, the implementation would require adherence to the Schools Organisational Code. Experience showed the larger the proposal the longer the timeframe needed. Confidence was expressed that the timescale outlined within the report was appropriate providing additional capacity was made available. The Portfolio Holder observed that issues do not become political footballs if they are working well. It is when they are highly contentious or inadequately put together. If the Sixth Form Review proposed changes that are well founded they will not become a political football. The key people to talk to will be the young people.

A Member who is a Councillor and School Governor noted it appeared that councillors wanted to see change. School budgets are a bigger threat to the Council than Children's Service and pace needs to be injected into this programme for financial reasons. The authority has no money and needs to change service delivery as too much money has been taken out of central services. It seems this programme is crying out for capital investment for transformation.

The Portfolio Holder noted that sixth form provision is funded differently than school funding however there is an issue around cross-phase subsidisation which is complicated. When the data is analysed regarding why students are choosing English provision there is no guarantee that future students would not continue to make this decision. The appetite for change was welcomed and it would be necessary to do this in a way that will work.

Members expressed the view that this review needs to be more aspirational and aim to attract pupils into the county to study at post 16.

The cross-subsidisation issue is not clearly understood and further work needs to be undertaken to ascertain how this is impacting on the budget of secondary schools.

This needs investigation along with the number of courses offered, the number of courses provided, the number of courses paid for and the number of students studying each course.

It is clear that the capacity of the team needs to increase and this may be linked to the rate of progress against the aims set out within the WESP. Consultation with young people will be essential to avoid a Judicial Review and it should not be forgotten that there are 73 councillors who should be consulted and can be made more use of.

The Portfolio Holder confirmed that there would be opportunities for input from councillors but the most important people to speak to are those who live in the individual areas.

The Chief Executive agreed that it was essential across the organisation that work was undertaken in the correct sequence. It would have been good to have moved more quickly on this over the last few years as it is important that young people have education in the right areas. There are issues around capacity and it is important not to rush things but to make the right decisions. The discussion this afternoon is welcomed with all parties wishing to move forward.

The Head of Schools noted there was a common theme. In 2013/14 Sixth form funding was £6.5m. Since then one third of pupils and one third of funding has been lost but the authority are still trying to provide a quality offer across 12 centres. This cannot continue without finding an additional £2.5m to continue

providing at the 2013/14 level or finding a different way of operating sixth form delivery.

How is funding calculated when students access courses on different sites?

Learners are registered at their home site then schools are funded to run a course independent of how many pupils access the course.

It appears that assumptions are being made regarding why people travel with young people staying because the offer is local and moving away for quality. Quality should be central to this debate.

The Portfolio Holder agreed but directed consideration to the list of subjects within the Learner Survey which indicated that traditional subjects were studied locally and it would be necessary to speak to colleges regarding their provision within Powys.

Why does the report exclude detail on Post 16 college education?

It will be necessary to improve strategic planning with partners which is being undertaken within the Learning and Skills Programme Board however, it has been restricted to Sixth Forms to keep it manageable.

The Portfolio Holder confirmed that this was in response to the conditions prevailing in the Sixth Form sector. It does not appear that the level of crisis is the same in College provision as it is in Sixth Form provision.

There are parts of Powys where the possibilities of Sixth Form Colleges have been considered for 50 years. It is time this was looked at. Transformation is an overused word. The changes in the Gwernyfed catchment were not transformational they were replacing old schools with new. Will this review be truly transformational?

Transformation can mean different things but this is about reform or re-organisation. The Gwernyfed Review reduced the number of primary schools from 10 to 5.

It appears the numbers of pupils drifting across the border are increasing. Is there time to stop this drift or is it terminal?

The Head of Schools noted this relates to the point at which the local offer becomes unpalatable and such movements will include push and pull factors. Historically there have been push factors. Shrewsbury College is huge and can offer a large range of courses. However, courses which would be of use for local occupations (such as LPG fitter) are not provided locally. Potentially this is reaching a tipping point.

The Portfolio Holder pointed to a correlation between the introduction of the compulsory Welsh Baccalaureate and the number of pupils leaving the county. However, it is essential that the authority retain an offer for Welsh learners as there is no opportunity for Welsh medium teaching in England.

Young people have a different perception to travel than their parents and do not consider 20,30 or 40 miles as a long distance.

The Head of Strategy, Performance and Transformation Programmes read out a letter from Welsh Government relating to the offer for financial support for digital learning.

The Senior Manager Schools Transformation advised that as the Council was now in purdah it would not be possible to take this item to Cabinet on 30th July and therefore it would be taken to Cabinet in September 2019.

Recommendations:

6.	SCHOOLS MAJOR IMPROVEMENTS (WELSH GOVERNMENT GRANT PROGRAMME)
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Additional grant funding was been received from Welsh Government in March 2019 but notification was received too late to amend the report which scrutiny had sight of and the report to Cabinet was deferred. The current report before Committee has been updated and is listed for Cabinet on 30th July 2019. The programme has been reshaped to take into account the additional £1.78million Welsh Government grant for School Major improvements. £566k of the £2,003million is to be used from the agreed Powys budget for school improvements for 219/20 with the remaining £1.4million to be used in 2020/21.

Can it be confirmed that none of the schools identified for work are at risk of closure?

Any schools with less than 70 pupils will be subject to consideration before major repairs are authorised although it is necessary to ensure that pupils in all schools are taught in a safe environment. It may be that some urgent work is necessary in schools that may close.

Could investment be held on those schools that are in a catchment with surplus places?

As there are a high number of surplus places, in some places 50% resulting from a long term failure to grasp the nettle, this would not help in allocating funding.

Scrutiny need to be assured that the authority is investing wisely.

The Portfolio Holder noted that a preliminary look at school data meant that reviews would be announced shortly.

Should the authority be fitting sustainably fuelled boilers rather than oil-fired boilers?

It is necessary to balance a number of factors when looking to replace boilers including use of green energy sources, reliability, value for money and overall costs for retro-fitting. New schools have been built to passivhaus standards but retro-fits are more complex and the use of sustainable energy sources is not the only factor to be considered. Some sustainable energy sources need more user input and schools that have these systems need to be trained in their use.

The costs for resurfacing the carpark in Llandysilio seem considerable. Is this accurate?

The costs outlined in the report are estimates however, there are extensive rules relating to school carparks.

Is the contingency of £50k this year and £199k next year realistic?

Contingency funds should be higher however the programme is flexible and if urgent matters arise then of necessity the programme will be refocussed. The programme needs to be kept in constant balance.

Cllr B Davies left

Given the flexibility of the programme how is it decided what items are deferred?

The programme is based on a priority matrix and schools know where they sit within the programme.

Cllr L Roberts and G Thomas left

Can scrutiny be assured that the Major Repairs are providing value for money?

The Portfolio Holder confirmed that procurement rules apply and best value has to be provided.

7. CHAIR'S BRIEFING

This item was deferred to the next meeting on 19th July 2019.

8. APPOINTMENT TO WORKING GROUPS

This item was deferred to the next meeting on 19th July 2019. The Chair asked Members to consider these appointments ahead of the next meeting.

9. ERW JOINT SCRUTINY GROUP

This item was deferred to the next meeting on 19th July 2019.

10. RESPONSES TO SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATIONS
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This item was deferred to the next meeting on 19th July 2019.

11. WORK PROGRAMME

The next meeting will be held on 19th July 2019 at 2.00pm.

County Councillor P Roberts (Chairman)