

CYNGOR SIR POWYS COUNTY COUNCIL.

Learning & Skills Scrutiny Committee

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REPORT TITLE: Update on Strategic Equality Objective 5

REPORT FOR: **Information**

1. Purpose

The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of progress in respect of Strategic Equality Objective 5 which aims to improve opportunities and outcomes for children living in poverty.

The actions undertaken are also linked to the report *A Charter for Change Report: Protecting Welsh Children from the Impact of Poverty*¹ by the Children's Commissioner.

This report demonstrates that we are committed to undertaking work to both support and achieve the actions of the Strategic Equality Objective 5 and the recommendations of the Children's Commissioners report, as well as identifying those actions required on a local basis to support our communities.

2. Update / Progress: Strategic Equality Objective 5

Strategic Equality Objective 5 aims to improve opportunities and outcomes for children living in poverty by 2024.

2.1 Appropriately target the Pupil Development Grant (PDG) and annual evaluation of the effectiveness / impact.

The support provided to disadvantaged pupils during the COVID period has been significant, with nearly all accessing childcare provision, digital devices

¹ A Charter for Change Report: Protecting Welsh Children from the Impact of Poverty, Children's Commissioner for Wales, <https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/A-Charter-for-Change-Protecting-Welsh-Children-from-the-Impact-of-Poverty.pdf> , accessed 11.04.21

being provided to ensure they are not disadvantaged, and many schools providing weekly welfare support for these learners.

The annual external audit of spend was undertaken during the autumn term and signed off by SWAP, our external auditors, and our S151 officer, and submitted to ERW.

During the remote learning period of spring term 2021, vulnerable learners were able to access face-to-face support from their schools. Many pupils attended their schools and received appropriate support.

2.2 We will deliver the School Holiday Enrichment Programme (SHEP).

The Catering Team has coordinated and supported schools in Powys to run the SHEP programme since 2017. A working group was established to deliver the programme within Powys during 2020, however the funding was suspended by Welsh Government due to COVID-19. Although the holiday enrichment programme did not run, families in receipt of FSM received payment vouchers / BACS payments and there was some provision / holiday clubs set up throughout the summer where meals were provided.

During quarter 3 of 2020/21, the Welsh Government confirmed their commitment to fund SHEP in 2021, with £4.85m allocated in the draft budget. The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) will continue to coordinate the roll-out by working closely with local authorities and partner agencies.

During the spring term, planning commenced for the SHEP 2021 programme across 5 Powys primary schools – Ysgol Golwg Y Cwm, Ysgol Trefonnen, Hafren Juniors, Maesyrrhandir Primary and Welshpool C in W. Contingencies will be put in place pending any Covid restrictions during the summer.

We are very pleased that the SHEP programme is being supported by the Welsh Government for 2021 and we committed to taking part in this valuable and much needed project for the benefit of those pupils and families who really need it. We provide food and fun activities over three weeks of the summer holidays, which includes a free breakfast and lunch, an hour of sport and nutritional education with many more fun activities. This enhances pupil's confidence, self-esteem and builds new friendship groups, along with supporting families who often struggle during the school holidays to entertain and feed their children. All contributing to supporting their wellbeing.

2.3 Ensure that the Welsh Government's Period Dignity Programme is fully supported in all of our schools.

In order to support accessibility and personal choice, a variety of options have been put in place to support period dignity in all Powys schools. Each primary school has received a stock of products recommended as suitable for younger girls, each secondary school has had two coin free vending machines installed, and has received a stock of vending products, as well as non-vending products, which will be replenished on a rolling delivery schedule (8

deliveries per academic year). In addition, a teen starter pack has been provided for each girl aged 9 and over, which includes a variety of feminine hygiene products and an informational leaflet, contained in a small reusable purse.

In line with guidance from Welsh Government, which allowed for the issuing of vouchers to cover the cost of feminine hygiene products during periods of school closure and holidays, period dignity vouchers were issued to support each girl aged 9 and over who was in receipt of FSM and who attended a Powys school. Schools Services worked in collaboration with the Catering Department so that the vouchers were issued by the same established method that was being used to issue the FSM vouchers. These were issued in April, May, June, July, August and December 2020, and January and February 2021.

A teen starter pack has been purchased for each girl aged 9 and over in preparation for the new financial year.

Each school in Powys was provided with a funding allocation to enable them to provide replacement clothing should it be required.

Powys is committed to supporting Period Dignity going forward, so will be extending its contract to provide feminine hygiene products to all of our schools, including the coin-free vending machines in our secondary schools.

2.4 Ensure that Governing Bodies give due consideration to the Statutory Guidance from the Welsh Government on school uniform.

As part of the LA transformation agenda, temporary governing bodies have taken careful consideration of the affordability, availability, and access to the school uniform. For example, after careful consideration and consultation with parents and pupils, Ysgol Llanfyllin opted against a school blazer due to the cost and chose two suppliers so that parents had a broader choice.

2.5 Our Income and Awards department will identify children who are entitled to free school meals and target advice in order to encourage take up.

At the end of quarter 2, 2,656 FSM cases were supported, including those which had transitional protection. By the end of the quarter 3, this had risen to 2,710. During quarter 4, further take up work was undertaken, identifying a further 25 FSM claims, with the year-end figure being 2,754 cases being supported.

2.6 Our Schools Service and Catering Department will raise awareness of free school meal entitlement and provide information to parents through Parent Pay and parent's evenings.

The Catering Team regularly messages parents, which includes information about how to apply for FSM.

Since the Welsh Government have announced the funding of FSM for entitled pupils while schools are closed and during the school holidays, the Catering Team have been providing fortnightly FSM vouchers / BACS payments to all entitled pupils who are not in school during term time and during the school holidays. WG have agreed to funding up until Easter 2022.

2.7 We will provide clothing grants for children at the start of primary and secondary education.

Working with Income and Awards, letters have been issued to all eligible families who have children in receipt of FSM, or who are caring for children looked after (CLA), to inform them that the PDG - Access uniform grant is available to them and providing details of how to claim.

Effective collaboration with Income & Awards has continued across the year. Reminder letters have been issued to eligible families who had not claimed the PDG Access grant and rapid work has been undertaken to contact those families who are now eligible following the extension of the PDG Access grant support years 1, 5, 8, 9 & 11. The 2020-21 allocation also has an extended deadline of 30 June 2021.

The number of grants paid at year-end were:

PDG Access = 546

PDG Access for CLA = 52

2.8 We will support families who are 'in work' poverty in individual cases through debt / budgeting / benefits maximisation and fuel support.

During the first part of the year work stopped due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Income and Awards Team undertaking phone support line that helped families and individuals and business with grants and debts and budgeting and benefits help. An additional 1000 calls were taken during this time.

Throughout the year, the team found £2 million of benefit gains for 2020/21 for customers in need. Next year we will also be able to break these figures down to the number of families supported.

2.9 We will explore providing additional support by reducing council tax for foster carers.

This work commenced at the start of the financial year but stopped due to COVID-19. This will be reviewed in April 2021.

2.10 We will complete additional support for reducing council tax for care leavers.

This activity was completed to deadline by April 2020.

2.11 We will provide Financial Hardship support through a Council Tax scheme.

Powys operates the council tax reductions scheme and we paid out £11 million to 10,214 customers in 2020/21. We also administer the council tax discretionary hardship relief scheme.

2.12 We will provide Housing Support through a Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) Scheme.

This scheme supports customers who face housing issues due to debt or other financial or crisis issues to keep their home. 1,400 customers were supported during 2020/21 with £585,000 of funds.

2.13 Provision of play resource packs.

Although not captured as an activity within the Strategic Equality Objective plan, funding was provided to support the childcare and play needs of low-income families by Children's Services. The funding was used to purchase play resources that focussed on communication and language development, fine motor skills and cognitive development. Consideration was given on the types of resources purchased; to ensure children could use them with the support of an adult or independently.

720 packs were designed, co-ordinated and distributed by the Powys Childcare Team to our 5 Flying Start areas: Ystradgynlais, Brecon, Llandrindod Wells, Newtown, and Welshpool, benefitting children under the age of 4.



3. Update / Progress: A Charter for Change Report ²

Meeting Basic Needs:

‘Local authorities should review the current provision of free breakfasts at primary schools to ensure that the scheme is available to all families that need it.’

Breakfasts clubs continue to operate throughout Powys primary schools to support those families that need it; this includes vulnerable children and the children of key workers. Many breakfast clubs have continued to operate even during the challenging times that we have been experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing a valuable resource to communities. Support was enhanced during the initial lockdown period with thirteen hubs providing childcare from 8am – 6pm, seven days a week, which included the provision of breakfast.

² *Ibid*

‘The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) should take a lead in monitoring local authorities’ spend on Discretionary Housing Payments and, where DHP is underspent, working with those individual authorities to improve the advertisement of the availability of this payment, as well as other payments which may assist families living on a low income.’

Powys County Council actively engages with the WLGA practitioner benefits group to discuss issues, including the take-up of DHP, and identify viable solutions. Powys County Council also reports DHP budget spend to the whole group.

The School Experience:

‘Local authorities where uniform recycling schemes are not already in place should work with schools in their area using our ‘Revolve’ resource to explore the creation of uniform recycling schemes using council-run buildings and resources in their area, drawing on the experiences of successful schemes such as in Denbighshire.’

Uniform recycling schemes are established in those schools where the need has been apparent.

Inclusion and Opportunity in the Community:

‘Local authorities should use our ‘Community Activists’ resource to involve children and young people in their planning processes when this involves space and facilities that they will use frequently as recommended in our Article 31 Spotlight Report.’

Powys County Council is committed to ensuring that children and young people are involved in planning processes for those spaces and facilities that they use frequently.

Engagement with pupils took place when developing the new Strategy for Transforming Education in Powys in 2019-20. In order to involve as many pupils as possible, this was undertaken in the form of a virtual meeting with pupils from a number of high schools across Powys.

Opportunities are also provided for pupils to give their views as part of any school reorganisation proposals. Versions of the consultation document for young people / primary aged pupils are prepared, depending on the age of the affected pupils, and a meeting with the school council(s) and / or pupil representatives of the affected schools takes place to gather their views on the proposals.

Once a decision has been made to proceed with proposals, for example to establish a new school, there are further opportunities for children and young people to input into the establishment of the new school, for example,

suggesting and giving their views on possible new names for the school or designing logos and uniforms. This is usually led by the headteacher and the temporary governing body of the new school.

The work that is undertaken as part of the 21st Century Schools Programme in Powys also engages with children and young people.

During design stage, the school pupils are invited to meet the design team to discuss what would be important for them in a new school building. We also hold community drop-in events.

Every project has a Community Benefits Plan, this plan sets out targets relating to local spend, employment opportunities, and engagement with children and young people.

We arrange specific activities which links to the school curriculum, and STEM especially. We have construction sessions, as well as health and safety sessions. Although each project is different, here are a couple of examples of the activities undertaken:

- Welshpool Church in Wales Primary School – a mini project was set up to link the construction project with the climate emergency. The wall insulation is recycled newspaper, and the pupils collected the newspaper and visited the factory to see how the process works.
- Brecon High School – the contractor led a robotics session with the pupils, where they were given the opportunity to build mini robots.

In addition, pupils view are sought on key activities that support them. For example, a recent survey was undertaken in January 2021 to measure staff, pupil and parental viewpoints and experiences of remote and blended learning. We received 3,422 responses in total, with 788 responses (23%) being from pupils.

Welsh Government and Local Authorities:

‘Assess local Free School Meal allocation to ensure each child or young person has sufficient funds for a nutritious, balanced meal.’

‘Any arrangements you have in place in respect of auto- enrolment for Free School Meals and PDG Access.’

Powys County Council currently auto awards some FSM claims where other benefit claims are made, and also makes some changes automatically when other benefits change. For example, if a family claims other awards such as Housing Benefit or Council Tax reduction, we will automatically award FSM if the family has children in a school in Powys. The Housing Benefit and Council Tax reduction claim form also covers FSM and asks for details of child household members and the school which they attend.

We also do take up work periodically to check awards such as Council Tax reduction for families with children of school age who do not claim FSM but where the family has an eligible income. We then award and write to advise that we have done so. We are planning to review whether it is possible to fully auto award claims.

We auto award PDG Access claims, but we do require some further information. Those families who are in receipt of FSM and have children of the relevant age, are advised of their eligibility for the PDG Access grant, asked to confirm they preferred banking method and then payment is made. Similarly, carers of children looked after (CLA) who attend school are also advised of their eligibility in the same manner.

This approach is proven very effective, with the work being undertaken by our Income and Awards Team, in liaison with Education, so that there is a single point of contact for families when accessing benefits and grants. Details of the grant are also available on our website, and this has resulted in some families who enquired about the grant also being supported to successfully claim FSM, which they had not previously accessed despite their eligibility.

We have also been supporting families entitled to FSM with direct BACS payments or supermarket vouchers since the start of the pandemic. With the Welsh Government supporting FSM funding for holiday periods and for FSM pupils who are off school because of Covid-related reasons. The FSM BACS or vouchers are also being provided to pupils who are not currently attending schools due to the current COVID restrictions. All of the support provided is particularly important given that we have seen an increase of 19.5% in FSM eligibility between December 2019 to December 2020.

Work with Credit Unions to widen the network of School Savings schemes, particularly amongst secondary schools.

During 2021/22 we will be undertaking an engagement exercise with schools and pupils to seek feedback on the implementation of a schools savings scheme. It is essential that pupil voice informs any scheme that is developed and implemented, therefore working together with pupils and schools, the aim is to provide pupils with a service which will support their requirements and develop their life skills.

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