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Learning and Skills Scrutiny Committee Tuesday, 17 October 2023

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE LEARNING AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD BY ZOOM ON TUESDAY, 17 OCTOBER 2023

PRESENT

County Councillor Gwynfor Thomas – Chair

County Councillor – G D Jones Vice Chair, A W Davies, B Davies, D Meredith, G Morgan, G Preston, L Roberts

Co-opted Members – K. Chedgzoy, M Evitts, S Davies

Cabinet portfolio Holders in Attendance:

P. Roberts for a Learning Powys, D. Thomas for Finance and Corporate Transformation

Officers: Marianne Evans, Eurig Towns, Jim Swabey, Sarah Astley, Nancy Owen, Emma Palmer Director of Corporate Transformation.

Others in Attendance Cllrs - P Lewington, J Jones and A B Davies.

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from

County Councillor Danny Bebb

Lynette Lovell – Director of Education and Children Services

Georgie Bevan – Head of Schools Service

Sarah Quibell – Service Manager for Education Support Service

2. DISCLOSURES 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. SCHOOLS TRANSFORMATION - NEWTOWN SCHOOLS REVIEW

Background:

In September 2021 the Council merged Ladywell Green Infants and Hafren Junior schools to form Ysgol Calon y Dderwen. A Strategic Outline Plan (SOP) has been developed submitted to Cabinet and WG to build a new 300 or 300+ place primary school on the site in conjunction with the North Powys Well-being Hub campus. There has since been an informal engagement exercise with the Treowen and Maesyrrhandir schools and Ysgol Calon y Dderwen.

In conclusion following the engagement exercise and the options appraisal recommendation to Cabinet was that: -

Approval given to commence the formal statutory process on the following proposal.

- To close Treowen CP School from 31.08.2025
- To extend Ysgol Calon y Dderwen to include the former Treowen CP School site from 01.09.2025 and run as a 2-site school until new build completed.

The second phase would be for

- Ysgol Calon y Dderwen to move to a new building, located on the existing site during 2026/27
- Treowen site would close.

Points raised by the Panel:	Responses received from Officers or Cabinet Members.
<p>The Committee requested a plan for the whole of the Newtown schools area as concern raised of possible multiple future changes causing disruption to and impacting on our learners.</p>	<p>There are 7 Primary schools within a 2–3-mile radius in Newtown. Transformation reviewed the Newtown area a number of years ago and progressed with the Hafren and Ladywell Green merger. Since then, Maesyrrhandir and Treowen numbers have significantly decreased which is predicted to continue. The wider plan for Newtown, due to the lack of available land to build or transform, would have to happen on a phased basis. There is a mix of different types of schools within the town, Welsh medium, English Medium, and the only Catholic school in the County.</p>
<p>Concern also raised in terms of whether the funding had been secured for the North Powys Wellbeing. What risk was there to the plans for Calon Y Dderwen if the rest of the development did not go ahead, how confident is the Authority that the project can be capital funded.</p>	<p>In terms of the Wellbeing campus, the Authority continues to work in partnership with PTHB on a cohesive critical path for an integrated master plan. Capital funding for the school element, as increased in size, cost inevitably increase. There would have to be a revised SOC (Strategic Outline Case) submitted to WG incorporating a different scope of school and a different level of funding. If the funding within the current BAND B programme was not available, the project would have to be submitted into the rolling 9-year Sustainable Communities for Learning programme prior to March 2024.</p>
<p>The Council has been in talks with WG for 7-8 years, for the development to be progressed, firm answers are required as</p>	<p>The uncertainty on the North Powys Wellbeing project causes intense frustration. The proposals allow the</p>

<p>blighting the development for schools in Newtown.</p> <p>Maesyrrhandir has 95 pupils, the buildings condition is not great, the pupils deserve equitable facilities for their education. If the current plan are progressed what would happen to Maesyrrhandir</p> <p>There are 286 empty places within Newtown, a higher number than the capacity of most of the primary schools in Newtown. Committee request a clear plan for the whole of Newtown, to assess if the capital investment within schools is targeted at the right place. The fear is potentially schools like Maesyrrhandir would be left behind.</p> <p>St Mary's has 54 vacant spaces within a 107-capacity setting, yet focus was on other schools under the transformation programme.</p> <p>The North Powys Wellbeing hub would form part of the re-generation of the area which can only be supported if WG funding can be secured.</p>	<p>opportunity to expand, should WG decide that North Powys Wellbeing project is not to be funded.</p> <p>There is concern of Maesyrrhandir being left behind, additional investment in the building was required, it was highlighted that staff were in discussions on sharing facilities at Ysgol Cedewain when it opens later this year.</p> <p>There were difficulties in re-organising or transforming schools within the catchment, due to a mix in classification of church and state schools. This case is complicated further as St Mary's is the only Catholic school in the county and is currently sustainable. Penygloddfa has been over capacity in recent years, this would not have made any significant impact on the exceptionally large capacity issue within Newtown. The proposal was the best solution to meet the educational needs of pupils within the southern half of Newtown.</p>
<p>The leaflets disseminated by the Portfolio Holder containing comments by Cabinet Members have given the impression that the Cabinet has already drawn its conclusions, would this be an appropriate way consult with the community.</p> <p>In regard to the sustainability of schools, the smallest school in Newtown would still continue and stand alone, whilst the proposed merger is between larger schools.</p>	<p>The other Cabinet Member is the local Member and is entitled to make representations to and ask question of his electorate.</p> <p>Time has been spent with the schools community speaking to Governors and headteachers to understand the concerns of the community.</p> <p>Many of these schools numbers have declined, which in turn would prove difficult to maintain Head Teacher role without a high teaching contact and the consequential impact on their wellbeing.</p> <p>These are schools with moderately high Free School Meals (FSM) and Additional Learning Needs (ALN), which within the ALNET Act places additional burden on the SLT & ALNCO.</p> <p>The Authority has a significant challenge maintaining number of Head teachers with the additional administrative load. A benefit of a merger into a larger school would allow for the expansion of the SLT and diversity of the supporting team.</p>

	<p>Under the Schools Organisational Code, the Authority has a responsibility to protect religious diversity, and as the only Roman Catholic school in Powys, makes it all the more challenging when it comes to making changes. At this point it would be hard to justify closing, when there were other better opportunities for alteration within Newtown.</p> <p>A forward plan for Newtown was difficult to put forward, due to the issue of predetermination and constrained by legalities.</p> <p>The rationale for the review of Newtown schools was to rationalise the number of schools through a phased programme. Examine if the plans for Calon y Dderwen could be increased with the benefits of a new building on a constrained site, for more pupils than originally planned. If the Authority had had access to the whole site, there would have been a different option proposed.</p>
<p>During consultations previously we have been informed that figures have an impact on the decision. Given the proposal put forward, leads to questions as to why has this decision been made.</p> <p>Cost per pupil numbers there was about £800 difference, huge difference in the projected figures and the condition of the buildings.</p> <p>55% of the vacant spaces are noted in Maesyrrhandir.</p>	<p>A key consideration was that Treowen School has a similar pupil profile to Ysgol Calon Dderwen, in terms of FSM & ALN.</p> <p>Maesyrrhandir has a significant difference with FSM profile at 56% and ALN profile at 47%.</p> <p>Treowen School has a FSM profile at 42% and ALN profile at 19%.</p> <p>Calon y Dderwen has a FSM profile at 36% and ALN profile at 24%.</p> <p>Another factor was which school the pupils attend. Approximately 90% of the pupils at Maesyrrhandir attend as the closest school, 60% at Treowen School and 11% at Calon y Dderwen.</p> <p>Further contributory factors were that Treowen school does not currently have a substantive Head Teacher in place, whilst the Maesyrrhandir Head Teacher was on secondment to another school.</p>
<p>Has consideration been given, within the process, to the financial implications required to maintain and bring the condition of Maesyrrhandir school up to date.</p>	<p>On paper there would be examination of the surplus places and building condition.</p> <p>The Service is aware of the significant maintenance requirement at</p>

	<p>Maesyrrhandir, a condition survey has been commissioned. As part of the major improvements programme investment would be planned over the next 5-10 years.</p> <p>There are significant surplus places at Maesyrrhandir, a reflection that historically it was a very large school. The question to be asked would be how was the space within the school utilised, as affected the capacity calculation. As progress was made the capacity at Maesyrrhandir would be reviewed, could areas be re-used which could reduce the surplus places.</p>
<p>One of the main reasons given for there not being a Welsh medium Secondary school in Newtown was the lack of capacity. Clearly as almost 300 primary places were vacant with further vacant places in the High School, capacity was not an issue.</p> <p>Other Committee members have requested the plan for Newtown, whilst appreciate it would be difficult to address all areas simultaneously, visibility on the long-term direction was required, especially to provide all-through Welsh Medium Education, given the Authority was using the third version of WESP in 7 years.</p>	<p>There is a lack of space rather than capacity in Newtown. In order to have a new all-through Welsh medium school there would have to be space to build the facilities required for the Secondary element.</p>
<p>Point made for an all through Welsh medium school in Newtown was crucial for the development of the Welsh language.</p> <p>Calon y Dderwen requires a new build as the current fabric of the school is not good enough to facilitate the children's education. However, is the proposed school site in the most appropriate place for the majority of the children who would be attending. Assurance sought that other options had been reviewed which could provide improved pedestrian and vehicular access.</p>	<p>The availability of land within Newtown was a key issue. Various sites had been considered within and outside of Newtown, with decision made that Calon y Dderwen was sited in a central location.</p> <p>With regard to access, following the significant number of concerns raised on the engagement visits and noted in the engagement reports, of congestion in a central part of town. During the build design process, there is a key requirement by WG that Active Travel must be considered with safe routes to school.</p>
<p>Chair noted that local member comment was very important, comments were not in the papers before Scrutiny, which was difficult as required their expert knowledge when discussing various areas of Powys.</p>	<p>In response to point raised of the Treowen school site if it were to be closed. There was an assumption it would become a derelict site. Options would need to be reviewed for what the building could be used for as an</p>

Comment made by Local Member Cllr Joy Jones.

Residents were very concerned with regard to the congestion and safe active travel routes for the current Calon y Dderwen site. These issues could be exacerbated with the proposed North Powys Well-being Hub.

There had been little dialogue with the communities and the reasons for merging one school over another had pitted communities against each other.

There has been no real consideration given to the regeneration of the Treowen School site should the school close.

The engagement process received 101 responses from Treowen families with only 9 positive responses.

Concern raised of staff well-being due to the uncertainty of the proposed merger would they begin to look for new roles elsewhere.

Comment made from Cllr Pete Lewington:

In agreement with many points made by Cllr Joy, in particular the traffic, parking and safety concerns raised about active travel routes. The engagement responses have very few positive comments whether from teachers, Governors, or pupils with similar recurring themes against the merger. The comments should be taken on board and communities listened to.

Treowen would lose its unique identity and education provision within the community.

There were no clear reasons mentioned in the proposal as to why Treowen and not Maesyrrhandir should be put forward for closure except for the current pupil profiling which was a snapshot in time which could alter and did not provide a sound basis for decisions made.

The poorer building condition of Maesyrrhandir must be noted together with the cost per pupil higher, than that of Treowen.

Concern was highlighted that in the proposal Maesyrrhandir pupils would not be in receipt of the benefits of a new modern learning environment.

Within the papers Option 3 was stated as not potentially achievable, yet Option 4

asset for the community i.e., a Family Centre, Early Years, Flying Start provision, 3+. Setting.

In respect of highways work was already underway as part of the Campus development on modelling traffic flows, counting traffic and understanding how the traffic would support the integrated site.

<p>was, request made to clarify why that conclusion was reached.</p>	
<p>Would pupils in the Treowen catchment be entitled to free home to school transport.</p> <p>What playing field provision would there be if the new school was to be built on the existing playing field.</p> <p>Where were current pupils coming from who attended Calon y Dderwen, only 11% were within catchment. Opportunities noted for apprenticeships.</p> <p>Would Calon y Dderwen incur additional staffing costs until Treowen site closed.</p> <p>In respect of the wellbeing of staff, there was no mention in the documentation of the views of Ysgol Calon y Dderwen would this process add further stress and anxiety to staff who had recently been through the merger of Ladywell Green and Hafren.</p>	<p>It would be unlikely that pupils would be entitled to free home to school transport as would live under the 2-mile threshold criteria. Existing playing fields provided an open piece of land which allowed for easy development and reduced need for temporary buildings. The existing school building will be repurposed to playing fields.</p> <p>Apprenticeships refers to potential during the new build. The budget share would be for one school across 2 sites initially. Then becoming one school which would have to consider the needs of staff. The one Head Teacher over the 2 sites would reduce some of the costs. It was hoped there would be limited impact of restructuring. If this were an opening of a new school pressure and anxiety would have an impact. Calon y Dderwen extending and incorporating Treowen would not necessarily put staff through that process again.</p>
<p>How long would Calon y Dderwen be without playing fields whilst development was progressed. There appeared to be a fine balance between Options 3 & 4 on the appraisal document which required further clarification. In hindsight, the community could have benefitted from the information on active routes and design of the new school prior to consultation process to give more confidence and faith in the process.</p>	<p>There would be a year for the pitch to be formed and seeded until it could be played, dependent on the season. In the interim, the school would have access to 2 multi use games areas. The options rationale was related to the similar pupil profile and leadership arrangements. There was work being undertaken on the whole campus with master planning and various consultants involved on the critical pathway.</p>
<p>The Standards of Education report by Estyn for Maesyrrhandir school, clarity sought on the number of N/A's reported</p>	<p>In Wales there were no longer judgement on categories. Previous reports cannot be compared. There were no issues with the quality of education provision at Maesyrrhandir.</p>

Scrutiny made the following observations:

- The Committee requested that:

- That a Powys-wide vision document be made available to all stakeholders to inform of the direction of travel for the whole schools transformation programme.
- Further work be undertaken on the long-term sustainability, including the equality of provision and the high number of vacant places, of schools in Newtown prior to decision and implementation of plans.
- The Committee remained unconvinced about
 - Using the North Powys Wellbeing Hub as an argument for merging Treowen CP School into an extended Calon y Dderwen campus, given that the associated funding from WG for this significant development to take place, has not been secured.
 - Whether the site for Ysgol Calon y Dderwen is the best site for a new school, considering that only 11% of pupils currently live within catchment. In addition, has exploration of any other potential site been undertaken.
 - The rationale behind schools with smaller numbers not being considered within the current transformation programme.
 - Plans for the future potential use of the Treowen school site if the school were to close.
- The Committee expressed concern:
 - Of the large number of available places (286) within Newtown schools, Committee cannot see a justification for building a new school.
 - That the proposals as set out, could potentially leave Maesyrrhandir CP School, in terms of maintenance and educational attainment in a modern learning environment, far behind other schools in the town.
 - Of there being no solid basis provided within the reports for a merger of Treowen CP School over Maesyrrhandir CP School with Ysgol Calon y Dderwen, other than similar pupil profiling through FSM (Free School Meals) and ALN (Additional Learning Needs).
 - Of the access to Calon Y Dderwen, the traffic congestion in the area, active travel routes for children across busy main roads.

Scrutiny Committee's recommendations to Cabinet were that:

1. Assurance be urgently sought from WG in respect of secured funding for the North Powys Wellbeing Hub and subsequent extended build at Ysgol Calon y Dderwen.
2. Assurance be given that the Cabinet will urgently address the high vacant places within schools in Newtown.
3. Assurance sought for the dissemination to stakeholders of clear transport plans, given the current level of traffic congestion around Ysgol Calon y Dderwen, prior to any decision being made.
4. The long-term sustainability of all schools in Newtown to be considered in the current plans, including the rationale behind schools with smaller numbers not being considered within the current transformation programme.
5. The vision for the delivery of education in Newtown, and the whole of Powys, to be shared with all stakeholders.
6. Assurance be given of equity of educational provision across all schools.

7. Clarity is sought on the future potential use of the site.

5. SCHOOLS TRANSFORMATION - IRFON VALLEY CP SCHOOL

Background

The Governing Body contacted the Schools Services with concerns relating to a recent drop in pupil numbers and the impact on the financial stability. It was explained that a review process would be undertaken. It was stated that the Governing Body were not part of the review process nor part of the recommendation before Scrutiny Committee today.

There has been a sudden decline in pupil numbers with the main reason cited as being no afterschool provision.

Recommendation to be made to Cabinet:

To proceed to formal consultation to close Irfon Valley CP School as of the 31st August 2024 and for pupils to transfer to their nearest alternative schools.

Points raised by the Panel:	Responses received from Officers or Cabinet Members.
<p>It would appear that local transferring in schools are either at capacity or near to, limiting the choice of schools for those pupils of Irfon Valley to transfer to, what would be the distance that pupils from Newbridge would have to travel to Builth or Dolafon.</p>	<p>Do not have actual distances to hand but in terms of admissions if the pupils were closest to Newbridge, application for a place could be submitted if availability, they would be allocated a place, with home to school transport provided if the closest school.</p> <p>Currently more than half of the pupils at Irfon Valley are closest to Dolafon but would have to wait until parents have made their decision.</p> <p>Currently there are 44 spaces in Builth Wells CP School available across the Welsh and English mediums.</p>
<p>2 pupils are closest to Newbridge which is currently oversubscribed, would the Admissions Team be flexible in their approach, or would there be the expectation that those 2 pupils would be transported elsewhere.</p> <p>What were the expected additional costs of school transport for those pupils who have already left Irfon Valley CP School and could be in receipt of that entitlement in the future, notwithstanding that pupils could be transported in possibly 3 different directions.</p>	<p>Estimated transport costs based on pupils transferring to their closest schools.</p>
<p>Does the £46k for school transport take into consideration those children that have</p>	<p>When the transport costs were modelled it would have been on the</p>

<p>already left Irfon Vally CP School who could become eligible for free Home to School transport, but who are not currently eligible.</p>	<p>number of learners in the school at that time. Will confirm to Committee when the modelling took place and numbers of children involved. Confirm this is the case – number of pupils at the school in September 2023</p>
<p>Free School Meals (FSM) currently is at 17.6% has this figure increased significantly since half of the pupils have transferred elsewhere.</p>	<p>The reason for the increase was due to there being less pupils within the school. Pupils who did not have FSM have transferred leaving those pupils in receipt of FSM. The reduction in numbers was due to parental choice rather than deprivation in any way.</p>
<p>Confirmation sought that the Safeguarding recommendations made by Estyn had been complied with and addressed, where these factor in the reduction in numbers.</p>	<p>The Safeguarding recommendation from Estyn had been addressed within the first few months. There were no concerns of the quality of education taking place inside the school, parents are not citing any reason other than after school provision for moving their child's school, friendship groups have then moved alongside</p>
<p>Cllr A.B Davies invited by the Chair to comment as Local Member. Comments made by the officers are correct the lack of afterschool provision has been the main concern. There were no concerns with the Leadership nor quality of education provided at the school. The Welsh medium school in Builth has taken a number of the Irfon Valley learners. Pleased to note that the Scrutiny Committee are giving due diligence to the report which in turn has provided confidence in the process. Chair commented that it was always important to have views from the Local Member (s) when discussing subject matter as sensitive and important to communities.</p>	
<p>Clarity raised over the potential use of the site, tis there a co-dependency between a village hall to the school and the income the village hall can derive from the school. There would appear to be a difference in approach between town and rural areas, the earlier discussion on Newtown schools listed possibilities, but there would appear a lack of opportunities and service delivery in a more rural community.</p>	<p>Cllr A.B. Davies advised that the village hall was completely separate to the school. The Service would follow the normal process for declaring properties surplus, i.e., discussions with the Community Council, options for Council services to utilise the space, then the option for capital receipts via the open market for sale.</p>

Scrutiny made the following observations:

- The Committee noted:
 - The concerns from the Governing Body to the Schools Service to look into the recent fall in numbers and the impact on the financial sustainability of Irfon Valley CP School.
 - That the Governing Body were not part of the review process, nor did they have any involvement in any decisions that have been made.
 - And were supportive of the consultation process proceeding in regard to the potential closure of Irfon Valley CP School.
 - That the previous safeguarding recommendations from Estyn relating to Health and Safety matters had been addressed.
 - There were no concerns of the quality of education provision or management standards at Irfon Valley CP School, with reason given for falling numbers was the lack of afterschool provision.

- The Committee requested that:
 - The Admissions Teams be flexible in their approach when dealing with any potential resettlement of pupils and when considering home to school transport.
 - That a Powys-wide vision document be made available to the to inform of the direction of travel for the whole schools transformation programme.

- The Committee remained unconvinced about
 - The future potential use of the site, given the lack of service delivery and opportunities in the more rural areas of the county.

- The Committee expressed concern:
 - Regarding the admissions policy and request this be reviewed at the earliest opportunity.
 - The cost of transport within the report at £46k, was this in relation to all pupils or the current number of 19 remaining in the school.

Scrutiny Committee's recommendations to Cabinet were that:

1. Assurance that the admissions policy will be flexible and reviewed at the earliest opportunity.
2. Clarity is sought in relation to the transport costs held within the report.
3. Clarity is sought on the future potential use of the site.

6. WORK PROGRAMME

Post 16 Education to be brought forward from June 2024.
Schools causing Concern December 2023 under Estyn Reports.

County Councillor R G Thomas (Chair)

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