

SUBJECT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 1 - MONDAY, 10 OCTOBER 2022

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE SUBJECT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 1 HELD HYBRID IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, CIVIC OFFICES, ANGEL STREET, BRIDGEND, CF31 4WB / REMOTELY - VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON MONDAY, 10 OCTOBER 2022 AT 11:00

Present

Councillor A Williams – Chairperson

RJ Collins	M J Evans	H Griffiths	M Jones
E Richards	T Thomas	AJ Williams	E D Winstanley

Apologies for Absence

D T Harrison and J Llewellyn-Hopkins

Registered Representatives

Rev Canon Edward Evans	Church in Wales
L Morris	Secondary School Sector

Officers:

Lucy Beard	Scrutiny Officer
Nicola Echanis	Head of Education & Family Support
Raeanna Grainger	Independent Reviewing Service Manager
Lindsay Harvey	Corporate Director Education and Family Support
Meryl Lawrence	Senior Democratic Services Officer - Scrutiny
Mark Lewis	Group Manager - Integrated Working
Claire Marchant	Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing
Jessica Mclellan	Scrutiny Officer

7. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

8. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of a meeting of the Subject Overview and Scrutiny Committee 1 dated 4 July 2022 be approved as a true and accurate record.

9. PUPIL ATTENDANCE, EXCLUSIONS, HEALTH AND SAFEGUARDING

The Group Managers for Vulnerable Group Support, Inclusion and School Improvement and Family Support presented the report and advised that the purpose of the report was to provide the Committee with details of how the Education and Family Support Directorate was responding to and addressing issues related to pupil attendance, exclusions, health and safeguarding.

The Chair invited the Cabinet Members and Corporate Directors to make any remarks before receiving Members' questions.

The Deputy Leader referred to continued increases in demand upon both the Early Help and Children's Social Care service areas which, as statutory provisions, had to be provided. She referred to concern regarding the data benchmarking arrangements and

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reassured Members that this was being addressed. She queried whether there was a call for all education practitioners to be trauma informed considering the number of exclusions for violent and aggressive behaviour and suggested that they looked at how Education Services were being delivered, how timely referrals were being dealt with and the length of the waiting lists.

The Cabinet Member for Education advised that this was a UK wide issue and when looking at how the world had changed since the pandemic it was sometimes forgotten how much children had gone through at a very early age. They needed to be mindful that the decisions they made had impacts on children's lives and mental health and he assured that they were working with schools to give every child the best chance when leaving education at eighteen.

The Corporate Director for Education and Family Support advised there were huge pressures on the system and the budget was going to be challenging going forward. He explained there was an extensive professional development process in place and they worked very closely with teams to make sure any additional training beneficial for schools was included.

With regard to the education safeguarding arrangements within Bridgend County Borough Council the Corporate Director for Social Services and Wellbeing advised that they had a Corporate Safeguarding Group and school auditing which was a good baseline of tracking, monitoring and improving safeguarding arrangements within schools. She believed that an integrated approach was needed in Bridgend regarding how they worked together at the front door and right the way through the children's journey.

Members were concerned regarding the impact of the cost-of-living crisis upon hindering children's public health and wellbeing. There were concerns regarding the condition of some of the educational facilities, children walking two or three miles to school if parents were unable to afford to run cars which could impact on attendance levels getting worse, the wording on some of the policies being difficult to understand, and the implementation of the Universal Primary Free School Meals (UPFSM) initiative given the lack of resources. Reference was also made to instances of teaching on weekends in order for pupils to achieve grades. The Members asked that these concerns be taken into consideration and whether Officers could help them understand and provide assurances to alleviate the concerns.

Officers advised that a comprehensive review of all their buildings was undertaken on a regular basis, however there was a backlog of maintenance concerns which was no different to other local authorities and they worked closely with the Communities Directorate, especially the corporate landlord team, to make sure these were met as expeditiously as possible. They were currently waiting on the outcome of a review from Welsh Government (WG) on the Home to School Transport Policy (HTST) and were always looking to refine their policies to make sure they were user friendly and compliant with WG expectations and aligned with WG policy. Officers expressed concern if there were instances of teaching on the weekend and agreed to look into any specific cases identified offline. With regard to UPFSM, they were working with schools to start breakfast clubs and how they could expedite the free school meals to primary school children as quickly as they could.

Members discussed the lack of performance data in the report and that it would be helpful to receive partnership data so they could see first-hand how supportive functions were making an impact on children within the county borough and the positive outcomes they were contributing to.

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Officers assured that benchmarking data was high on the list of priorities and was being addressed. They had spent a lot of time trying to strengthen partnership working. They now had a joint operational group which met fortnightly and brought together partners from Early Help, family support from children's social care, the Police, the National Health Service and any multi agency partner which supplemented the conversation around the challenges that they were facing across the county borough. With regard to performance data there was a plethora of data available and there would be a detailed report to Corporate Parenting Committee about the outcomes, which were positive.

Members expressed concern for how the provision of school transport affected the safeguarding, attendance and mental health agendas and referred to incidents where learners had been bullied or ostracised due to the provision or lack of a bus pass. Concern was raised regarding the wellbeing of children in school where the transport provider had been allocated more than one school to pick up from and could therefore be late arriving, members of staff were staying behind to look after pupils.

The Cabinet Member for Education advised that he would be meeting with the WG Education Minister and Bridgend's constituency Member of the Senedd to discuss HTST and lobbying for the review to be completed to enable the position going forward to be known. Officers advised Members of 'No pass No travel' that had been introduced three years ago and were concerned to hear about potential bullying in respect to this and asked that Members refer specific details to Officers outside of the meeting. They advised that a strong line had been taken with people misbehaving on their school transport and they had worked closely with the schools to put in place appropriate measures very quickly around the perpetrators. Officers advised that there was nothing that prevented a transport operator from utilising its fleet constructively, but they did not allow operators to carry out double runs if it affected the timely delivery of school transport. If there was an issue in their contracts and terms of conditions, they could issue warnings and reprimand operators on the basis of poor performance, and they investigated any allegations.

Members discussed the rise in the number of safeguarding referrals and asked the Headteacher Invitees what impact this was having on schools and members of staff who were spending more time dealing with the referrals. They also questioned what impact the time being spent on referrals was having on general teaching practice.

Headteacher invitees confirmed that safeguarding referrals were taking more time, but the referrals were important and were taken very seriously. They advised that many of their Federation meetings were being taken up with safeguarding issues and concerns which were mainly around communication, and the inability to contact social workers was a challenge along with regular changes of social workers and absence rates, which had an impact on what was happening in the schools. Although agency social workers had been taken on, they could have different processes and procedures or not be familiar with the local area, so there were challenges in addition to the significant number of referrals. They also advised that they were dealing with quite variable and intense situations in schools and there seemed to be delays when trying to get information quickly from colleagues outside the school who were there to support them. With regard to the impact referrals had on teaching practice, they advised it was not completing the referral itself but the time taken to contact the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) or Education Engagement Team and then the support they had to offer the individual pupil and their families, however they emphasised it was the right and proper response.

Officers advised there had been some challenges in terms of recruitment of social workers and had addressed that earlier in the year by bringing in a managed agency

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team which had brought about positives and negatives. They agreed to attend a Federation meeting if it would be helpful.

Whilst not wishing to discuss any particular case, Members asked, if some form of analysis were applied to the referrals, whether there were consistent themes that schools were confronted with.

Officers advised they were seeing young people present with challenging and aggressive behaviours within schools and the local communities, towards their peers and staff, making it stressful and difficult for the schools to manage, but they were also seeing these issues within the family home. They were looking at how to promote as much information and advice for families and local communities to assist as best possible with some of these issues. They advised that there were a lot more young people presenting with anxiety and mental health issues and there was a lot of work being done through school based counselling services, with their needs considered on an individual basis.

Members asked, in relation to MASH and Information Advice and Assistance (IIA), whether calls were being recorded, as schools sometimes telephoned for advice initially before making a referral and if it was not recorded, whether those children were being fully safeguarded. Members also referenced point 4.6 in the report and the terminology used which suggested that not all concerns were being documented and questioned whether the wording could be changed if all concerns were being logged.

Officers noted the terminology and advised it was one system used within schools to record all concerns and that schools had to record any concerns they had around pupils. It was highly recommended that when schools contacted MASH and IAA that professionals put in the referral form so they knew that it had been completed. However, they were aware referrals took place over the phone and had become much more robust in terms of looking at the history of a case when making a decision in how best to progress and what action to take. Officers advised they would put a note out to all staff and administrators ensuring they were clear on the process.

Members discussed safeguarding training being improved for Governors and asked whether it was possible to make safeguarding training compulsory for Governors.

Officers advised that WG did not mandate safeguarding training for Governors at present, but that they had raised it within their Safeguarding and Education Group to report back and escalate.

Members expressed concern that counselling was only available for year six pupils and upwards and that children under that age needed to see their General Practitioner (GP) and be referred, given the difficulty of trying to get an appointment with the GP at that time. They also questioned the length of time it took for those children to receive counselling following a referral.

Officers advised they had school-based councillors within secondary schools but there was a range of other services available to pupils. In primary schools they had wellbeing workers who were trained and competent to support young people within that setting, for younger children they also had play therapy. They advised that waiting lists would differ from school to school, but an update could be provided.

Members questioned the figure recorded for behavioural instances in secondary schools as it did not give very much contextual information. They asked for a brief overview of how it compared to the previous year, whether there were any breakdown figures, whether there were any discernible differences in parts of the county compared to others

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and whether there was any correlation between other indicators, such as Welsh index of multiple deprivation and other factors such as poverty.

Officers advised that pre-pandemic there were 544 fixed exclusions over the course of the whole year and up to April this year they had 707. They explained they had more data linked to some of the issues highlighted which was currently being processed and could be reported once analysed.

Members discussed point 4.16 of the report and the increase in pupil behaviour, noting an observation of negative behaviour themselves outside of school. Members recalled that schools had Police links via a Police liaison officer and asked if these were back in schools and whether some workshops might help to improve behaviour.

A Headteacher advised that they had restarted Police Liaison Officer visits in their school to deliver workshops and Officers advised they should be going back into school and would escalate it with Police colleagues to highlight there was some concern it was not as accessible as it should be.

Members discussed to what extent the high levels of poor behaviour could be a result of undiagnosed mental health disorders. They questioned the waiting times for diagnostics for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) referrals in general and, although more of a cognitive condition, also the waiting times for the diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Officers advised there was invariably an element of a link and they were working on that by liaising with Officers, schools, and families. With regard to waiting times for ADHD there had historically been long waiting times for diagnosis but could obtain more information if required. With regard to CAMHS, they were working closely with colleagues from Health and there was a designated clinical lead officer in place. The whole school approach to wellbeing was based on the Nest Framework and there were pieces of work underway but they were not where they needed to be yet.

Members congratulated Officers on the work they had been doing with cognitive disorders in Welsh medium provision and asked if there was a gap between finding diagnostics for Welsh medium and English medium children.

Officers explained that they had good provision in Bridgend irrespective of the first language spoken by a child or young person who had a diagnosis of autism and they could continue their education through that medium. The response would be exactly the same whether they were having their education provided through the medium of English or Welsh.

Pre-pandemic there had been discussion regarding education psychologists as Members had been concerned to learn at that time they were under pressure and reduced in numbers. Members asked for an update on the current situation.

Officers advised there had been an increased demand on the service but it should be back to full capacity at the end of the term and mitigations had been put into place to identify any shortfalls.

Members were concerned regarding learners taking exams for the first time as during the pandemic their work had been assessed and asked how those learners were being prepared and their wellbeing being supported.

Officers advised there was a plethora of support for wellbeing for schools and families and asked the Headteachers if they would provide some examples to the Committee.

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Headteachers advised that they had introduced wellbeing days where they collapse the timetable once every half term to focus on mental health issues that the pupils bring to them. They had also introduced a checkout, where pupils spend some time at the end of the day with their form to talk about how the day has been and to share concerns, so they do not carry those home with them. There were also enrichment session afternoons where they could relax and do something that was outside of what was going to be examined or tested.

Members expressed concern, given the cost-of-living pressures, whether school uniform grants being monetary rather than a voucher may result in the money being spent on food instead of uniform and the effect that would have on a child's wellbeing and school attendance.

Members acknowledged the support and literature available to children during the pandemic but highlighted that there needed to be support available to children who were asking questions about the war in Ukraine to ease their anxiety and make them feel safe.

Members referred to how access to GPs was having an impact on absence from school as learners, due to a delay in diagnosis and treatment, had extended absences from school. They referred to confusion regarding Covid and the rules for attending school, as individuals were being told isolation is a choice, so some had been isolating, and some had not. The Committee felt it would be helpful if, as an authority, they could work together with the Health Board, on guidance for children with Covid and when to return to school.

Officers felt that consistent communications from local authorities and the Health Board was important to provide advice for schools and parents. They advised as part of the Executive Head Group they had previously asked for information to be sharpened to schools to make sure it could be communicated to parents.

Members were concerned with the secondary school attendance figure of 86.5% and asked how it compared to the Welsh national average and whether some schools in the most deprived areas would be considerably below 86.5%.

Officers explained they did not have comparable published validated data to make that judgement. They advised there was a correlation between those areas in higher deprivation being below the percentage figure indicated but not exclusively, it was a variable position.

Members also discussed that there were genuine cases where pupils and families needed support and asked how the authority differentiated between those families that required that support to help with attendance and those that were truanting. They understood WG were reintroducing the fixed penalty notices, which would mean a financial sanction on non-attendance. They asked Officers in what scenario would a parent receive a financial sanction and sought assurance that the families in need of the support would not be sanctioned.

Officers advised there was strength in their model as they were able to put a wider context on the variety of reasons for pupils not attending school. They looked at it on a case-by-case basis so the strength of the model was when they got the information from schools, they had the Education Welfare Officers within those locality hubs and then the young people who may be described as having persistent absenteeism based on a consent model, they would work with those families to try and resolve the issue or issues

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stopping them from attending school. Regarding fixed penalties, WG had given new directions but they would not use those as the first resort.

Members asked, in the most extreme cases where all mechanisms had been exhausted, whether they would consider referring the matter to the Police.

Officers advised they work closely with the Police and had Police colleagues integrated into their delivery model in terms of the IIA, MASH and the locality hubs so where those conversations would be appropriate, they would have them, but they would start on that supportive level.

Members referred to page 15 of the report and asked Officers if they were seeing an influx of referrals from schools into Early Help in any particular areas of the county, whether there were any concerns or particular areas within the Early Help screening team to respond to ongoing and increasing demand for support and had they implemented any actions in response to the review of the Early Help referral process.

Officers advised that staffing had been increased to assist with demand, they had updated the Bridgend County Borough Council website to reflect more detail around what Early Help was and what was available in the local authority. They had also been looking more at what is available externally and through local communities or national services with the aim of getting more information out to people. This had assisted in terms of their waiting list at their front door for Early Help services, as back in June they had around 250 referrals waiting to be processed which would take around four to six weeks and they were now at a point where there was no waiting list for the front door for Early Help support. They advised that there would be a piece of work done to look in more detail in terms of where referrals were coming from and whether there is specific support needed to be offered in those areas.

Members referred to school breakfast clubs and discussed in more detail their purpose and that not all schools had them. They expressed concern that some children would not have a meal before school and wanted to ensure that, whilst the breakfast clubs were closed long term in certain schools, those children who were in desperate need continued to receive breakfast.

Officers advised that in the schools where they are currently unable to provide staffing to support a breakfast club, they were looking at options regarding whether they could provide a food element rather than the supervisory element of the breakfast club. They assured Members that they were working hard to provide a solution.

As there were no further questions the Chair thanked the Officers and Invitees and advised that they may leave the meeting.

Following consideration of the report, the Committee made the following Recommendations:

- That the Local Authority considers whether it can make safeguarding training mandatory for School Governors.
- That the Local Authority conduct a review of school pickup times by contracted transport providers and the impact on the safeguarding and well-being of pupils and staff.
- That the consistency of schools' links visits by Police Liaison Officers be escalated to ensure contact and input with all schools.

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- That concern is expressed regarding communication delay when headteachers made safeguarding referrals and were waiting to receive information that they needed to receive quickly.
- That the positives of wellbeing support in schools be shared across the county borough as best practice.
- That the Corporate Director - Education and Family Support be requested to raise at the next Regional Partnership Board meeting the need for consistent community communication from the Health Board and a consistent message to schools for communicating with parents regarding Covid, to clarify the rules for whether pupils should attend.
- That the human resource challenges are addressed to enable provision of breakfasts in all schools, to meet the national legislative obligations set out by Welsh Government.
- That concern is expressed regarding grants for school uniforms being monetary rather than voucher where the money is not being spent on uniforms, due to the cost-of-living pressures and children were attending school in old clothing or not in uniform.

and the Committee requested:

- A response on what wellbeing support was available for pupils taking examinations and what support and information pupils could access regarding the War in Ukraine.
- The consistent themes / concerns regarding exclusions and pupil non-attendance in secondary schools in more granular detail and the support mechanism in place to support the families.
- Information regarding individual Schools' waiting lists for counselling.
- Exclusions data represented by percentage of pupil population per school / area.
- Data regarding the extent of behaviour linked to undiagnosed mental health and ADHD, to include the waiting times for ADHD diagnosis and CAMHS.

10. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE

The Scrutiny Officer presented the Committee with the Forward Work Programme (FWP) in Appendix A for discussion and consideration, requested any specific information the Committee identified to be included in the items for the next two meetings, including invitees they wished to attend, requested the Committee to identify any further items for consideration on the FWP having regard to the selection criteria in paragraph 4.3 and asked the Committee to note that the FWP for the Committee would be reported to the next meeting of Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

A member queried when two topics listed on the FWP as 'to be scheduled' were likely to be programmed. The Senior Democratic Services Officer - Scrutiny advised that there had been a number of changes to the scheduling of reports due in part to a meeting of the Committee in September being cancelled during the national period of mourning and the Local Government Settlement being delayed until December delaying consideration of the Medium Term Financial Strategy. She advised that the scheduling of the reports would be included for discussion in the work planning meeting with the Scrutiny Chair and Corporate Director.

There were no further items identified for consideration on the Forward Work Programme having regard to the selection criteria in paragraph 4.3, and this could be revisited at the next meeting.

There were no requests to include specific information in the item for the next meeting.

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RESOLVED: That the Committee approved the Forward Work Programme in Appendix A, noted that the Forward Work Programme and any updates from the Committee would be reported to the next meeting of Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee and noted the Recommendations Monitoring Action Sheet in Appendix B.

11. **URGENT ITEMS**

None.