

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, CIVIC OFFICES, ANGEL STREET, BRIDGEND ON TUESDAY, 17 FEBRUARY 2015 AT 2.00 PM

Present:

Councillor EP Foley - Chairperson

Councillors:

D K Edwards	M Jones	C Westwood
C A Green	G Phillips	R E Young
P John	R Thomas	D B F White

Registered Representatives & Co-opted Members:

Mr W Bond (Special School Parent Governor)  
Mr T Cahalane (Roman Catholic Church)  
Mr K Pascoe (Secondary School Parent Governor)  
Mr R Thomas (Primary School Parent Governor)

Invitees:

Councillor H J David	-	Cabinet Member – Children & Young People
D McMillan	-	Corporate Director – Education and Transformation
N Echanis	-	Head of Strategy Partnerships & Commissioning
R Davies	-	Group Manager – Business Strategy and Performance
K Mulcahy	-	Group Manager – Transport
A Harris	-	Consultation and Engagement Officer
R Rees-Jones	-	Marketing and Engagement Manager

Officers:

R Keepins	-	Scrutiny Officer
G P Jones	-	Head of Democratic Services
M A Galvin	-	Senior Democratic Services Officer – Committees

157 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from the following Members:

Councillor P Davies  
Councillor D M Hughes  
Councillor D G Owen  
Councillor H J Townsend

158 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

159 LEARNER TRAVEL POLICY

The Scrutiny Officer presented a report, the purpose of which, was to inform the Committee of the outcome of the public consultation exercise in relation to the review of the Council's learner travel arrangements, and for Members to consider and agree any recommendations they may

want to make to Cabinet when it meets to consider the matter, in light of the proposals shown in paragraph 3.2 of the report, and the consultation responses to the consultation process.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Committee welcomed the Invitees to the meeting, and the Corporate Director – Education and Transformation gave a resume of the report.

She felt that it was important to set the topic before the Committee today into context, as it could be easily isolated as a single issue, when in fact, it had to be looked at in relation to the overall Children's Directorate and its budget, which as Members were aware, had been subject to some significant reductions under the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS).

The Corporate Director – Education and Transformation advised that she was both proud and passionate of Children's Services and how these had been transformed in the Bridgend County Borough the last 12 – 16 months. In this time, BCBC had come out of Estyn monitoring and Bridgend were only one of three Authorities in Wales to have done so.

She confirmed that her Directorate had put extra focus into Children's Services in order to manage cuts to its budget, which were £3.2m last year and £3m for the forthcoming year. Despite these cuts however, the Corporate Director – Education and Transformation informed that there had been an improvement in services, in that attendance in Secondary schools had meant that BCBC Attendance rates in 2014 for secondary schools in Bridgend are now above the average for Wales for the first time in five years.. In terms of NEETS, in 2012, Estyn judged that the proportion of young people leaving school whose destination was not known was too high. Since then, the authority has worked well with its partners, and in 2013, the proportion of young people leaving school in both Year 11 and Year 13 whose destination was not known has significantly reduced to be below the Wales average.

Since the inspection in October 2012, outcomes for learners have improved in all the main indicators in the Foundation Phase and in key stages 2, 3 and 4. For most indicators, the rate of improvement has been faster than the Wales average over the last two years..

Once more to put into context the level of savings that her Directorate had been required to make, the Corporate Director – Education and Transformation set out budget commitments against the controllable and non controllable budget over the next 3 years. All the above reflected that hard decisions had to be taken in areas such as Learner Transport and Nursery Education, as the Authority no longer had the funding under its MTFS, to provide over and above the statutory minimum for these services due to ongoing budget restraints.

A Member referred to paragraph 4.4 of page 38 of the report, where it was expressed that there would be great financial benefit to the Council in introducing the proposals contained in the report. He added however, that these needed to be weighed up and balanced against the risks that the proposals may bring for schools, pupils parents and families. In terms of the word "risk", he asked how this would be managed. He added if consideration had been given to introducing a Risk Register to include issues such as Safe Routes to Schools, etc. An example of this was that pupils currently in Bettws Primary School would qualify for placement in Coleg Cymunedol Y Dderwen and due to this, there would need to be a safe route to school provided, so that pupils could safely walk if necessary, what was a fair distance to and from this secondary school.

The Corporate Director – Education and Transformation, confirmed that the Directorate were endeavoring to establish a new level of expectation amongst County Borough citizens, in that the Authority could not continue as it had done in the past, to generally provide services that were over and above those that are statutory required. This needed to be achieved though in such a way, as to not make pupils accessibility to schools unviable. Any risks that arose as a result of changes to what was previously provided, such as transport arrangements to take children safely to and from school, had to be mitigated despite services having to be cut or reduced in line with the MTFS.

Should the learner travel proposal for post 16 learners be approved, then mitigating any risks may include promoting the vehicle loan scheme. The Corporate Director – Education and Transformation also added that an Education Maintenance Allowance was available via a grant funding scheme, for those pupils of a poorer background. In response to the basis of the question, she confirmed that if no safe route to school scheme was provided for, then transport of some means or another would continue to be provided for pupils to and from such school.

The Group Manager – Transport added that guidance was issued by Welsh Government under its assessment of Safe Walking Routes, and the local government had a duty to provide these routes, should they need to be required at a certain location.

In the case of the above, if there was a change in risk along the lines referred to by the Member due to pupils moving or changing schools, and this was raised with Highways Officers, then it was incumbent for the Authority to assess the situation, particularly in the case of the provision of safe school routes which was obviously imperative for pupils and other learners safety.

The Group Manager – Business Strategy and Performance stated that there was scope also under Welsh Government operational guidance to take into account perception when considering what was or was not a safe route to school. This could include levels of street lighting, views of parents and certain other relevant factors. He added that a Schools Advisory Group and Schools Task Group had been set-up to look closely at risks and other issues regarding the Learner Travel Review and other elements of improving issues relating to schools and their sustainability. He further added that there was also a commitment in the latest version of the Corporate Plan to provide increased commitment and support with regard to schools and further education opportunities, so it was incumbent upon the Authority to maintain or look to improve what was presently being provided.

A Member noted the papers and elements of risk, including the change of statutory distances whereby school transport provision was proposed to be affected, including the proposal to remove transport for 6<sup>th</sup> form pupils. He felt that it was difficult to see how all these changes could be sufficiently mitigated. He did not consider the report before Members addressed sufficiently the risks that would arise from the changes. He acknowledged that the risks were highlighted, but he felt they were insufficiently addressed. He further added that there was more information in many respects contained in a previous background document to the report, namely an update report for Informal Cabinet on the Learner Travel Review dated 29 July 2014. He was concerned that if the risks were not fully addressed and mitigated, then this could give rise to an increase in NEETS.

The Group Manager – Business Strategy and Performance, advised that it was difficult at present to offer firm responses to the risks that had been identified as part of the review, as there were no concrete proposals in place regarding this review at the present time. Until these were in place, the full extent of the risks would not be known. However, there would be mitigation put in place to negate these when they were fully known. Some potential risks that had been identified, including in the Capita report, were based on a worse case scenario which may not result in being the case following all the Review information having been collated, analysed and evaluated.

A Member noted that outside some schools, for example St Patrick's School in Maesteg, there was a risk in that a lot of vehicles parked outside this school causing traffic congestion, and this would be exacerbated by the review of the Policy. There was however, insufficient funding available for traffic calming measures to be put in place to address problems such as these.

The Group Manager – Transport advised that in conjunction with proposals that may be implemented as part of the review of the Learner Travel Policy, different measures had to be looked at with regard to problems such as this, with each case having to be considered on its

own merits. It was about establishing what was suitable for each location with regard to issues of parking in the vicinity of schools and safe routes to/from them, etc.

With regard to funding avenues to pursue for implementing traffic calming measures, then examples of these were through monies allocated to Directorates from Capital funding through the Authority in terms of the allocation of Capital funding or through bids to Welsh Government, though the success or otherwise of the latter would be dependent upon the level of similar bids that may be made by other local authorities.

The Cabinet Member – Children and Young People, advised that within the Local Travel Plan approved previously by Cabinet, there were a number of proposals that would improve routes to a number of schools situate within the County Borough that were to be affected by the changes proposed. He added that there was also still funding available through the Safe Routes in Communities funding stream. This year, the Authority had been successful in terms of bids in respect of primary schools at Porthcawl and Tremains in Brackla with regard to making routes safer in relation to cyclists and walkers who attended these schools. The outcome of the consultation process for the Learner Travel Policy would need to be awaited, however notwithstanding these, the Cabinet Member – Children and Young People added that risks for all schools would be mitigated by some means or another.

A Member referred to the provision of the Moped Scheme and asked if this would involve lessons for those interested in participating in this, as well as providing suitable clothing for them.

The Group Manager – Transport confirmed that this would be something that would be considered for people wishing to take up this provision of transport.

A Member appreciated that BCBC were still offering above the statutory minimum in terms of providing free transport for those eligible to receive this, however, he felt that to stop providing this for learners aged 16 or over, who go to school or college, would have a negative effect on NEETS where we have progressed really well as an Authority. He was not really in support of the 'Moped Scheme', in that there may be an issue of safety there, though he appreciated that there were cycle paths feeding some schools that were both effective and safe. He asked if any work had been done with organisations such as Careers Wales and Job Centre Plus, in terms of looking to secure any possible financial assistance for continuing to fund transport initiatives for post 16 learners who were eligible to receive this. Further information he also felt should be shared with Members on the Transport Discount Scheme and the impact of this on Post 16 transport provision.

The Head of Strategy Partnerships and Commissioning advised that the Authority had made huge progress with regards to improving NEETS, though notwithstanding this, reductions in terms of provision of transport under the Learner Travel provision had to be made under the Council's MTFS. As had been alluded to previously during debate on this item, the full extent of the risks as a result of putting in place some of the proposals contained within the report were somewhat of an unknown at present.

She confirmed that a similar piece of work to that which the Authority were pursuing had previously been carried out in England, which had resulted in just a 3% reduction in post 16 learners pursuing education opportunities, following a revised Policy being implemented by this particular Authority.

Members had posed a number of questions at today's meeting, quite a few of which had related to the possible risks involved in the proposed changes. However, with regard to post 16 learners and whether they would continue using transport to/from schools and colleges, etc, should they have to pay for this, comparable data could not really be examined in order to make an effective comparison, as there was no data available to accurately rely on, that confirmed

how many post 16 students relied upon this provision, including under the current arrangements where it was free for those eligible to receive it.

The Head of Strategy Partnerships and Commissioning further added, that NEETS figures would be closely monitored if some of the changes proposed in the report came into fruition, and if they rose as a result of these, then the Authority would take necessary steps to address this.

The Cabinet Member – Children and Young People, suggested that Officer's in the Highways and Transportation Section of the Council could possibly enter into dialogue with bus companies such as First Cymru, on them possibly providing concessionary fares for students aged 16 – 18 years of age who regularly use transport by bus to school or college not just for the purpose of furthering educational opportunities, but also for access to leisure and part time working opportunities.

The Group Manager – Transport confirmed that he could pursue this with First Cymru in order to ascertain if they would consider such an option, and if so, on what terms.

A Member asked if the Authority were tightening up on transport Contracts, by that she meant establishing if the Council were actually providing transport for people using this as opposed to not using it, ie buses being provided on routes to places of education where there was little or no take-up for this. She noted also, that certain neighbouring authorities had re-scheduled the start and finish times for nursery education, to coincide with that of schools, in order to support maintaining such transport provision. In broader terms, she added that Children's Services should liaise with other Authorities who have implemented changes to their Learner Transport provision as part of budget reductions for benchmarking purposes, to see the extent of changes they have put in place and how these have subsequently worked out.

The Group Manager – Transport advised that some consultation work had been undertaken along the lines the Member referred to, though further work needed to be carried out in relation to this.

The Head of Strategy Partnerships and Commissioning advised that some of the work that was required to be undertaken, included finding out the number of students who actually used the transport that was being provided to all the various school and further education routes, though a data exercise had been carried out in order to see which routes were being used more than others. This was a starting point from which to proceed, in order to achieve some of the efficiency savings that were required to be made.

She added that some benchmarking work had also been undertaken through contacting certain other Authorities that were similar in size to BCBC, such as Newport and Wrexham County Borough Councils. Though other Authorities such as these, whilst having made changes to their Learner Transport provision, had not made changes that were exactly along the lines BCBC were proposing, so therefore it had not been easy to make a true like for like comparison. The piece of work carried out in England referred to earlier in the meeting was the closest to what Bridgend were proposing.

A Member referred to the fact that the Authority were now only one of a few in Wales who had been removed from Estyn monitoring, and he felt this was excellent news, together with the fact that attendance figures of pupils attending schools was generally very good too. He felt though that there was nothing in the report to reflect how positives such as these could be sustained, particularly as a result of the changes being put forward. He added that 37% of pupils in the school where he was a School governor, took up transport provision, and quite a majority of pupils also received free school meals as the school was situate in a deprived area. He feared that the extent of savings that was required in terms of the Learner Travel changes, was going to be out of reach for families of students who were financially not that well off, and that this

may have a detrimental effect on the number of students that end up pursuing further Post 16 education opportunities should they no longer be eligible for free transport to school or college etc, which would obviously then in turn, reduce attendance figures, especially for Post 16 Learners.

The Group Manager - Business Strategy and Performance acknowledged these comments, but added that it was up to the Committee to decide if these risks were palatable taken in the context of the overall budget reductions that had been earmarked for the service area of Learner Travel. There were risks of some degree or another to most if not all areas of the Authority where cuts were being made in terms of services, and these cuts as Members were aware were unavoidable. There was only limited and no real accurate data available for confirming the amount of pupils who regularly used school transport across the County Borough, and this included those who came from deprived areas. In all intents and purposes therefore, the whole Project would be somewhat trial and error in its infancy stages, until such time more research and analysis of data could be produced under the revised Policy. He added however, that attempts would be made to try and support people who were not going to be eligible to receive free transport under the new arrangements through other methods.

A Member questioned the thoroughness of the consultation process that had been undertaken. He referred to the Equality Impact Assessment (EIA), and noted the consultees outlined within this, though he was sceptical that all these had been consulted with over the proposals. There was also no reference made to the Children's Commissioner having been one of the consultees, and he felt that they should have been. He further questioned the timings of letters sent out to some of the consultees, arguing that some of these had been sent out too late into the consultation process, therefore resulting in insufficient responses having been received in terms of the process overall.

The Consultation and Engagement Officer confirmed that the EIA confirmed the level of consultation that had taken place in respect of the Home to School Transport Policy. This included sending out relevant information regarding this electronically both in English and Welsh, and making such information available on the Council's web site. Council social media sites were also used ie Facebook and Twitter, to maximise engagement with younger people who often used these sites. Paper copies of relevant literature and documentation had also been sent to all BCBC libraries for general inspection by the public. He added that all information shared as part of the consultation process had been accompanied with the appropriate contact details of the Directorate, should anyone have wished to give any feedback on this, or required further clarification regarding the main proposals that were subject to change.

The Consultation and Engagement Officer added that Estyn had been contacted over the proposals, as had all School Governors and the Church in Wales school, Archdeacon John Lewis at Brackla. He was aware that certain schools ie secondary schools had held meetings over the consultation process and the proposals contained as part of this. Information had also been shared with the Bridgend Equalities Forum and with School Councils he confirmed. Before the consultation process had commenced, Head teachers of all schools in the County Borough had been made aware of the proposed review.

The Group Manager – Business Strategy and Performance confirmed that Officer's had made every effort to actively engage with the Youth Council and had been written to as part of the consultation process as had all 60 School Council's. It had been difficult to meet all of these, so as an alternative, Head teachers of schools had offered to meet with them on behalf of the Authority to outline the main proposals that comprised the changes to the Policy. A total of 22,000 pupils had also been notified, in order to advise them of the 12 week consultation process.

The Corporate Director – Education and Transformation referred those present to page 7 of the Learner Travel Review Consultation report, and to the fact that 551 secondary school pupils had actually responded to the consultation process, in order that they were aware of the suggested changes, and to provide feedback upon these, should they feel the need to do so.

A Member whilst noting this, pointed out however 55% of these responses had come from one school alone, namely Archbishop McGrath Secondary school.

In terms of risk, a Member confirmed that there were two schools that stood out from the remainder, Archbishop McGrath school and Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Welsh Medium Comprehensive school in Llangynwyd, as both these schools covered very wide catchment areas. He felt that the proposals of the revised Policy could possibly force these schools into de-stabilisation should the likes of 6<sup>th</sup> form transport be withdrawn. He asked what mitigation was in place to minimise this risk.

The Corporate Director – Education and Transformation advised that the Schools Task Group, that comprised a number of school Head teachers and other key stakeholders were looking at surplus places at schools. She added that a commitment had been given as part of the review of the Policy, to mitigate falling school roles should there be any risk to the viability of a school as a result of changes to the policy. Mitigation factors would come out in due course she stressed, when firmer plans were put in place regarding revisions to the Policy. She assured Members that should changes to the learner travel policy be eventually put in place, these would not result in the closure of any secondary schools.

A Member questioned whether some of the information in the report required further consideration, as some figures presented a picture that seemed better on the face of it than it may actually be in reality. He noted that Proposal One in the report indicated that 34% of respondents had indicated that there would be little or no impact on them or their families. He questioned this as a headline figure, as this figure didn't account for the other 66% which was a percentage that was almost double this figure. Added to this, 75% of the respondents were from Archbishop McGrath where a majority of pupils and their families would not be affected anyway, as they were situated outside the 3 mile proposed limit. He added that due to the fact that the data was based on a multiple choice option, it was difficult to compare one percentage to another.

The Group Manager – Business Strategy and Performance advised that outcomes in terms of data production and analysis from the consultation process, had been compiled by the Corporate Communications team. The fact that a significant amount of respondents to the consultation process had come from young people and families connected with Archbishop McGrath secondary school, was just one of those things, and though this may have resulted in skewed figures to the percentages overall, all response that were received had to be taken into account as opposed to being excluded, even if the majority of these had come from one school.

The Corporate Director – Education and Transformation assured Members that if the proposals outlined in the revised Learner Transport Policy were put in place, then these would be phased in over some considerable period of time.

The Cabinet Member – Children and Young People added that the consultation process had been difficult and though it may not have resulted in conclusive outcomes, it did reflect by the overall low levels of responses, that the majority of individuals would remain unaffected by the changes and that those eligible to receiving free school transport would continue to do so until they end their phase in primary or secondary education, as would subject to qualifying criteria, their younger brothers and sisters who were already in the school.

As this concluded debate on this item, the Chairperson thanked the Invitees for attending the meeting and responding to questions, following which they retired from the meeting.

**Conclusions:**

Following detailed discussion with Officers and consideration of the report, the Committee agreed that whilst they did not fundamentally disagree with the proposals they did not feel confident in making firm recommendations on them based simply on the evidence provided in the consultation report.

For this reason, the Committee recommend that in order for Cabinet to feel confident and assured that any decisions made are based on robust information and evidence, they ensure they have taken into account the following:

1. Whether suitable consultation has taken place with Young People given that the Children's Commissioner for Wales asked that they be a target audience for consultation. Members felt this was particularly important for pupils who would be affected by potential changes to Post-16 transport;
2. Whether the data presented needs further clarification and explanation as some of the headline figures present a very positive view which is questionable. One example given was in relation to the 34% who stated that Proposal One would have little effect; Members questioned this as a headline figure as it omits to account for the other 66% which is a more significant figure. In addition to this, 75% of the respondents were from Archbishop McGrath, where a majority of pupils and their families would not have been affected anyway due to them being outside the 3 mile proposed limit. Furthermore, due to the fact that the data is based on a multiple choice option it is difficult to compare one percentage to another;
3. The associated risks and mitigating actions. Members were particularly concerned over the impact of the proposed changes on YGG Llangynwyd and Archbishop McGrath Catholic High School given their large catchment areas and the impact on removing post-16 transport. Whilst acknowledging that this is recognised within the consultation report and that Officers provided reassurances that any impact would be mitigated, Members expressed concerns over the lack of evidence to support these mitigating actions. For example in relation to traffic calming measures outside schools that may need to be introduced due to increased traffic resulting from the removal of learner transport. Members noted the lack of information on whether there would be funding towards such measures;
4. Comparative information from other Local Authorities where the Learner Transport Policy has been similarly changed, evidencing the impact on learners and schools;
5. Associated background documents as referenced in the report to Cabinet on 16 September 2014; Workstream A paper - The analysis of the potential impact on schools, colleges and learners of withdrawing free post 16 transport, related capita reports and the individual school assessment reports detailing the potential impact of the proposals for each school;
6. The potential impact on attendance as a result of the proposed changes. Members expressed particular concern over this for Post-16 learners;
7. Impact of proposed changes on the Authority's NEET figure at a time when Bridgend has been praised for its work in this area and moved from 22<sup>nd</sup> out of all Authorities in Wales to 1<sup>st</sup> for reducing the number of young people classified as NEET.
8. Information on the potential implications of the newly proposed Welsh Government Transport Discount Scheme.

Due to their concerns over the lack of information in the report for Scrutiny, the Committee agreed that instead of providing comment on the proposals based on the consultation results,



the Committee would act as consultees themselves and therefore provided the following observations and recommendations purely based on the three proposals:

- a) Members generally supported proposal one; to change the distance required for free transport to the statutory minimum.
- b) Members supported the set-up of the advisory board on Safe Routes to School in order to address issues around safety to children associated with proposal one.
- c) The Committee expressed concerns over the high figure stated for the charge of a bus pass under proposal two. This, alongside the proposal to remove all post-16 transport could significantly impact upon post-16 learners. It is therefore recommended that if proposal two is approved some form of subsidy be introduced for post-16 pupils that would tie in with proposal one.
- d) Members noted the option of a 'hardship fund', but queried the figure of £30k, where this figure had been derived from and what criteria will be set against this hardship fund. Members recommend that Cabinet consider whether this figure is suitable and would meet the needs of 'alleviating the impact on learners', as stated in the report, and whether there is flexibility in this figure should the need prove to be greater.
- e) Members expressed strong concern over the rationale for removing Post-16 transport due to the fact that it is only if these places are then taken up under a charging policy that any financial savings can be realised. Given the high figure proposed for these paid places Members questioned the likelihood of their take up and thus the achievability of these savings, particularly if no subsidy was put in place.
- f) Given the uncertainty around the achievability of the financial savings resulting from options two and three, and in order to minimise the impact on Post-16 Learners the Committee recommend that no decision on Post-16 school transport is made until the full implication of the Welsh Government Transport Discount Scheme is revealed and reconsidered alongside all related evidence highlighted above in points 1-8.

### **Further Comments**

- Members requested that Officers undertake discussions with First Cymru over the economics of a bus pass.
- Members requested to receive information on the Rationalisation of School transport when it becomes available.

## 160 **FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE**

The Scrutiny Officer presented a report outlining the items due to be considered at a meeting of the Committee to be held on the 7 April 2015, and further sought confirmation of the information required for the subsequent meeting following the Annual meeting of Council in May 2015.

### **Conclusions:**

The Committee noted the topics due to be considered at a meeting of the Committee scheduled for the 7<sup>th</sup> April 2015 and acknowledged the invitees who are to attend the meeting of the Committee following the Annual meeting of the Council in May 2015, and the topics due to be considered at that meeting.

The meeting closed at 5.15pm