
EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 17/04/18

Present: Councillor Beth Lawton - Chair
Councillor Nia Jeffreys - Vice-chair

Councillors: Menna Baines, Freya Bentham, Steve Collings, Selwyn Griffiths, Alwyn Gruffydd, Judith Humphreys, Elwyn Jones, Cai Larsen, Dewi Owen, Paul Rowlinson and Cemlyn Williams.

Co-opted Members: David Healey (ATL) and Dilwyn Elis Hughes (UCAC).

Officers present: Gareth James (Members' Manager - Support and Scrutiny) and Eirian Roberts (Member Support and Scrutiny Officer).

Present for item 5 below:

Councillor Gareth Thomas (Cabinet Member for Education)
Garem Jackson (Head of Education)
Gwern ap Rhisiart (Gwynedd Area Education Officer)

Present for item 6 below:

Councillor Gareth Thomas (Cabinet Member for Education)
Garem Jackson (Head of Education)
Gwern ap Rhisiart (Gwynedd Area Education Officer)
Einir Thomas (Senior Manager - Additional Learning Needs)

Present for Item 7 below:

Councillor Gareth Thomas (Cabinet Member for Education)
Garem Jackson (Head of Education)

1. APOLOGIES

Councillors Aled Evans, Huw Wyn Jones, Keith Jones, Elfed Roberts and Gareth Williams; Anest Gray Frazer (Church in Wales) and Rita Price (Catholic Church).

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

No declarations of personal interest were received from any members present.

3. URGENT ITEMS

None to note.

4. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous meeting of this committee held on 23 January 2018 as a true record.

5. OUTCOMES OF GWYNEDD FOUNDATION PHASE

The report of the Cabinet Member for Education was submitted, noting the outcomes of the report commissioned into the Foundation Phase.

During the discussion, the following main points were highlighted:

- Despite the finding that social skills were lower among children than in the past, the performance in Gwynedd in terms of the personal and social indicator was high and suggested that it was not as great a problem as the linguistic factor.
- The fact that the performance among children in Gwynedd in terms of output was third throughout Wales, including in the language field, suggested that the primary system as a whole was functioning as it should and that children were leaving the primary system with the necessary skills to enable them to reach their full potential.
- Pressure should be put on governors to make every effort to employ Welsh speakers for every post at a school, although admittedly this could be challenging in some areas.
- the report jumped from one thing to another rather than concentrating solely on the foundation phase.
- several references were made in the report to the weakening of the Welsh language, e.g. the comment that not every staff member adhered to the school's language policy at all times and that they turned to speak English with non-Welsh speaking pupils. There was also a suggestion here that children were allowed to answer tests in English when the situation arose, contrary to the policy of responding to tests in Welsh. It was also necessary to bear in mind, when referring to pupils with 'English as an additional language', that English was also an additional language for the 64% of the children of Gwynedd who came from Welsh speaking households.
- there was no reason why all children, with the exception of newcomers, could not pursue their schooling in Welsh.
- the fall in the number of Welsh speakers at our primary schools was a cause for concern and this needed to be addressed at once or there was a danger that the numbers would fall to such a degree that it would not be possible to justify the policy at all.
- It was acknowledged that immersion education in the foundation phase was critically important and that the language centres played a very important role in immersing KS2 pupils.
- Although it was understood that there had been no empty spaces at these language centres to date, should such a situation arise in future, consideration could be given to extending the provision beyond year 2 only, but bearing in mind that the younger the child, the less pertinent the course was to them.
- there was room to strengthen the bridging element between the foundation phase and meithrin groups in the field of oracy. There were some excellent people in the meithrin groups who promoted language acquisition skills and who also had clear expertise in the foundation phase who could also assist meithrin groups so that the children's baseline would improve when they started attending school.
- It was not believed that there was any value in setting up specific language centres to teach children English since learning English posed no difficulty for anyone due to the language's influence on children of all backgrounds. In contrast, Welsh lacked the opportunities to speak it outside school.
- there were roles for members, as councillors and primary school governors, to exert influence to ensure the language policy was strongly implemented within the schools.
- the technological revolution that had taken place over recent years meant that a balance had to be struck between ensuring that children developed to be natural communicators with people and, considering the demands that would eventually be placed on them in the field of employment, simultaneously ensuring that they were not deprived of future experiences in the field of technology.

- Cuts to the education improvement grant would be a great cause for concern, bearing in mind that 64% of the grant paid the salaries of foundation phase assistants. Since some assistants had recently received pay rises, and since the Council was unable to fund salary increases to those funded by grant, there was less money available to employ assistants generally.
- Cutting the pay of the assistants would increase teacher workload and there was a need to persist in challenging the governments in Westminster and Cardiff about the situation.

The Cabinet Member thanked the schools for their efforts in the foundation phase field, and specifically in the Welsh language field, and stated that there was evidence that shows that children, by the age of 11, were achieving appropriately and beyond their age in every field, including Welsh.

The Head of Education referred to the series of main recommendations at the end of the report, explaining that some of them were recommendations for the authority and others were recommendations for GwE. He would ensure that the recommendations for the authority formed part of the service's business plan for the foundation phase and that the recommendations for GwE had been incorporated in the requested schedule.

The Cabinet Member warned that it would be difficult to achieve a number of the recommendations on account of the cut to the education improvement grant.

It was agreed that a further report would be submitted to this committee on the effect of implementing the recommendations at the end of the report.

6. ADDITIONAL LEARNING NEEDS AND INCLUSION

Submitted - the report of the Cabinet Member for Education, giving an outline of the Additional Learning Needs and Inclusion Service that came into force in September 2017, detailing the main successes of the service and the fields that required further development to ensure an effective and efficient service to the Gwynedd and Anglesey Education Authority partnership.

During the discussion, the following main points were highlighted:

- The Other Net programme, which supported parents where there was uncertainty or lack of understanding of the implications of home education, was praised and it was noted that individuals who had been outside the education system for years had moved back into mainstream education with the input of this programme and Comic Relief. Councillor Cemlyn Williams declared a personal interest, as he was a director of Cwmni Sylfaen which had links with this programme in the past. He was not of the view that it was a prejudicial interest and did not leave the meeting.
- Schools were central to the success of the new system and it was important that the teachers / assistants received the necessary training to move this forward.
- The support of the Health Board was also central to the success of the service.
- Concern was expressed that the Counselling Service currently had a waiting list of almost 100, but collaboration with CAMHS was welcomed. It was noted that this work bisected the remits of several scrutiny committees and that preventive philosophy was also becoming more prevalent in schools. It was noted that there was a need to look at the reasons for the increase in anxiety among young people.
- The report did not refer to able and talented children, who were also children with additional learning needs.
- the service was very much appreciated in the main stream.

- the individual development plans were long-winded documents that generated an additional workload for schools.

The Area Education Officer was asked to give his impressions of how things had progressed so far and of any problems he anticipated in future. He noted that:

- the changes had been substantial and significant, not only to include the provision for schools and the way of working with schools, but also in terms of the work across two counties.
- That an important element of the success of Phase 1 of the statutory review was that, as a whole, the process had responded to any changes as it progressed. Nevertheless, some things had already changed, in response to the observations made by schools and in order to make the service even more efficient.
- Since it was a very broad field and that questions often arose, the user group was set up so that the improvement process could continue indefinitely.
- Phase 2 of the review would mean more changes again, and that lessons learnt in Phase 1 would be incorporated in Phase 2 so that it could be considered as part of the brief for the next steps.
- the plan to rationalise the team, etc., had addressed half the anticipated financial savings and the remainder had come from reducing the integration budget and that this had already been modelled at the schools in the budgets they had received.

The Cabinet Member noted the intention to report back to the committee on the progress of the plan on an annual basis, or more often, and suggested that the best time to do so would be at the end of October/November as this would allow for any backlog from pupil absences over the summer holidays to be addressed before the assessments took place. The changes to the services would also be clearer by this time.

The committee accepted that the plan had so far been successful and looked forward to seeing the results of the next stages.

7. THE PRINCIPLES OF A FIT FOR PURPOSE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Submitted - a report on behalf of the Cabinet Member for Education seeking the opinion of the scrutiny committee on the proposed education principles that would form the basis for fulfilling the Education Department's vision for the system to ensure a high quality of education for the children and young people of Gwynedd for the twenty first century.

Based on the results of the consultation with Governors and schools, and the Education Department's vision, members of the scrutiny committee were specifically asked for their views on the following principles that were being considered as the foundation for the education system for Gwynedd in future:

- A system of viable secondary schools;
- Two age ranges within the same class in the primary sector;
- Approximately 80% of non-contact time for the Head teacher to concentrate on leadership issues in the primary sector.

Based on readily available information, the following observations were highlighted during the discussion:

- There must be clarity about what the impact of adopting these principles will be.

- It was likely that a teacher or a teacher's hours would be cut in some schools and that would be very difficult for a head teacher, especially if he/she was in charge of two or three schools.
- This was only the beginning and there was a great deal more scrutiny to be done.
- The lack of applicants for posts in the majority of primary and secondary schools was a cause for concern.
- The system was too fractured to attract the next generation of leaders. For example, department heads at the smallest secondary schools did not have the opportunity to develop leadership skills because, as single person departments, they did not have the time to lead the department and there was no one in the department to manage it. Furthermore, since primary schools were often too small to have a deputy head teacher, opportunities here were also lacking for people to develop leadership skills.
- The substantially greater demands imposed on people with regard to educating and leading meant that posts in schools had become far less attractive.
- The questions in the questionnaire could have been more penetrating, e.g. rather than asking only for an opinion on the statement "*It is important to give Head teacher enough time to manage and lead ...*", the respondents should also have been asked whether they agreed with the statement despite its implications.
- As regards the suggestion that secondary school head teachers should be in charge of around 900 pupils, there was a wish to see robust evidence in support of this in the form of research work in this country and throughout Europe about the size of school that worked best and yielded the best result among children.
- Although the intention to merge some small schools to make them more viable was welcomed, this was not practically possible in Gwynedd at present and the head teachers would spend a large proportion of their time travelling between sites.
- the colleges' recruitment policy, which insisted that those seeking to pursue a teacher training course held a 2:1 degree at least, meant that young people would go to England to train as teachers and that this, in turn, was leading to a shortage of teachers locally.
- recruiting teachers in Meirionnydd and Dwyfor was especially problematic as specialist teachers in different subjects were reluctant to teach at schools that were unable to provide them with a sixth form teaching experience.
- Tywyn Secondary School, which only had 280 pupils, had had an excellent report from Estyn recently; why, therefore, consider that a school needed 900 pupils to be viable?
- the way forward to ensure the future of schools with fewer pupils / teachers was to make greater use of technology, such as Skype, where children at one school could join in with lessons at another school that had a specialist teacher.
- no changes should be introduced without prior consultation with the communities affected and to always presume against closing schools.
- Since a number of head teachers would reach retirement age in the coming years, sufficient preparation should be made in anticipation of this, e.g. through providing a portfolio highlighting the advantages of teaching in Gwynedd and circulating it widely.
- Teaching posts in Gwynedd were only advertised on the Council website and people teaching in other parts of the country were unlikely to look at it. Jobs should be advertised farther afield and teachers, consequently, would be attracted back to the county.
- There were concerns that collaborative arrangements between secondary schools would affect the lifelong learning schools established in Bala and Dolgellau.

- In terms of teaching a range of ages, collaborating up was likely to mean moving children from one school to another and the only way of doing this, eventually, was to close a few schools.
- There was general support for the principles, but it was acknowledged that there were huge challenges in being able to deliver on this.

The meeting commenced at 10.00 am and concluded at 1.00 pm

CHAIRMAN