



EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MULTI-LOCATIONAL MEETING HELD AT THE COUNCIL OFFICES PENALLTA HOUSE AND VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON TUESDAY 4TH JUNE 2024 AT 5.30 P.M.

PRESENT:

Councillor T. Parry - Chair
Councillor B. Miles - Vice Chair

Councillors:

E.M. Aldworth, C. Bishop, A. Broughton-Pettit, M. Chacon-Dawson, P. Cook, D. Cushing, M. Evans, A. Farina-Childs, C. Gordon, T. Heron, A. Leonard, J. Roberts, J. Simmonds, S. Skivens, and J. Winslade.

Cabinet Member:

Councillor C. Andrews (Education and Communities).

Together with:

Officers: R. Edmunds (Corporate Director for Education and Corporate Services), K. Cole (Chief Education Officer), G. Jenkins (Interim Director of Social Services), J. Williams (Assistant Director – Adult Services), S. Richards (Head of Education Planning and Strategy), A. West (Place Shaping and Sustainable Communities for Learning Service Manager), P. Warren (Strategic Lead for School Improvement), , S. Ellis (Lead for Inclusion and ALN), J. Duggan (Assistant Head), K. Honey (Principal Educational Psychologist), J. Southcombe (Finance Manager), L. Pine (Lead Education Welfare Officer), C. Parry (Lewis School, Pengam), L. Denton (Lewis Girls School), M. Jacques (Scrutiny Officer), S. Hughes (Committee Services Officer) and J. Lloyd (Committee Services Officer).

Also in attendance:

Councillors S. Morgan and J. Pritchard, and co-opted Member Mr M. Western (Cardiff ROC Archdiocesan Commission for Education Representative).

RECORDING AND VOTING ARRANGEMENTS

The Chair reminded those present that the meeting was being live streamed, and a recording would be made available to view via the Council's website, except for discussions involving confidential or exempt items. [Click Here To View](#).

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor K. Woodland, Mrs T. Millington (Parent Governor Representative), Mrs P. Ireland (NEU), Mrs K. Cole (NEU), and Mr D. Davies (Caerphilly Governors Association).

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received at the commencement or during the course of the meeting.

3. CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE CALL-IN PROCEDURE.

There had been no matters referred to the Scrutiny Committee in accordance with the call-in procedure.

4. EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny Officer introduced the report that informed the Committee of its Forward Work Programme planned for the period June 2024 to March 2025.

Following consideration of the report, it was moved and seconded that the recommendation be approved. By way of Microsoft Forms, this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that the Education and Social Services Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme as appended to the meeting papers, be published on the Council's website.

REPORTS OF OFFICERS

Consideration was given to the following reports.

5. POST 16, SINGLE SEX AND SURPLUS PLACES BOARD – PROPOSAL TO CLOSE LEWIS GIRLS SCHOOL AND MAKE A REGULATED ALTERATION TO LEWIS SCHOOL PENGAM.

Councillor C. Andrews (Cabinet Member for Education and Communities) introduced the report which officially consulted with Members in respect of the Post 16, Single Sex and Surplus Places Board recommendation to close Lewis Girls School and make a regulated alteration to Lewis School Pengam to change from single sex to co-education with effect from September 2025.

Members were advised that the Lewis Girls School site would be retained as a provision to Lewis School Pengam to manage the transition over a number of years (minimising impact on exam pupils and enabling staff and pupils to be integrated over an appropriate timeframe).

A Member queried the cost implications of retaining Lewis Girls School as a provision to Lewis School Pengam to aid the transition process. The Place Shaping and Sustainable Communities for Learning Service Manager advised Members that school properties are maintained through existing school condition surveys and provided assurances that additional investment was not expected at the Girls School site. Members also heard how the two-year period proposed in the report was subject to change.

A Member enquired if staff at Lewis Girls School would have to apply to retain employment and expressed concern that staff at both schools were not being treated equally in this regard. The Chief Education Officer advised Members that when a decision had been reached the

Council would be working with both Headteachers to achieve good outcomes for existing staff if the proposed changes went ahead and the number of pupils at Lewis School Pengam doubled as a result. This had been achieved with staff at Cwmcarn Comprehensive School under similar circumstances. However, it was reiterated to Members that under the proposal Lewis Girls School would be closed. The Headteacher of Lewis School Pengam (Mr Chris Parry) outlined to Members how it was anticipated that staff would follow the Girls School pupils if the proposal were accepted and highlighted the collaborative work which he was already undertaking with the Headteacher at Lewis Girls School. The Member queried if there was an underlying presumption that employment at Lewis School Pengam was secure and it was not at Lewis Girls School.

The Chief Education Officer acknowledged the interpretation but reiterated that if the proposal was accepted Lewis School Pengam was committed to expanding its staff team to include and absorb as many staff as possible from the Girls School. The Member sought clarity on her interpretation that staff at both schools were being treated differently. The Chief Education Officer accepted that this was the case due to the different status at each school as the proposal was for Lewis Girls School to be closed.

The Member expressed the view that the plans amounted to a takeover rather than a merger, and the Place Shaping and Sustainable Communities for Learning Service Manager advised Members that the Council had followed Welsh Government guidance in proposing the closure of one school and the regulated alteration of the other school. The Member expressed concerns as staff at both schools were being treated differently and enquired about the viewpoint from the Trade Unions. The Chief Education Officer advised the Committee that the Trade Unions had been supportive so far as they had confidence in the Council due to the way similar situations had been handled previously.

A Member enquired if there would be any single sex classes in the future if the proposal were accepted. The Chief Education Officer highlighted that moving to co-education status was one of the driving factors for the proposal and advised that a transition programme had been drawn-up by both headteachers which would allow Year 11 pupils currently going through qualification routes to be taught in single-sex classes. All classes would reach co-education status from 2026 onwards.

A Member enquired about when it was first suggested that both schools be merged on one site. The Chief Education Officer advised Members that discussions within the cluster had been taking place since circa 2000. The Member also enquired about the views of pupils. The Headteacher of Lewis School Pengam (Mr Chris Parry) advised Members that the proposal had received unanimous support at School Council. The Headteacher of Lewis Girls School (Ms Lynette Denton) outlined how she was yet to formally consult with her pupils but highlighted that the general mood was positive as all pupils had experienced co-education at Primary School level. The Place Shaping and Sustainable Communities for Learning Service Manager also highlighted that the views of pupils would be included as part of the consultation process. The Member clarified that Lewis School Pengam had the capacity to accommodate the extra pupils, as the school was currently operating below capacity.

A Member asked if additional building work would be required if the proposal was accepted. The Place Shaping and Sustainable Communities for Learning Service Manager advised that projections up until 2031 had been included in the Consultation Pack and based on this data it was concluded that no additional building work would be required at the Pengam site. Members also heard how officers had worked with colleagues in the Planning department and the possible impact on pupil numbers from any future developments had been included in the plans.

A Member requested an update on the PFI (Private Finance Initiative) contract at Lewis School Pengam, as Council had agreed to terminate the contract earlier than scheduled due to the maintenance costs involved. The Corporate Director for Education and Corporate Services advised Members that this was the case, and that the Council was currently

negotiating with the PFI provider and had also been advised that the proposal under discussion had no bearing on these negotiations.

A Member queried the pupil travel arrangements and enquired if some pupils would no longer be entitled to free transport if the proposal went ahead. The Place Shaping and Sustainable Communities for Learning Service Manager advised Members that this had not been considered at this stage, but a Transport Policy was in place which would be applied appropriately after a decision had been reached on the proposal.

Following consideration of the report, the Education and Social Services Scrutiny Committee noted the information contained in the report and the attached consultation pack. Members offered their views as part of the consultation process for the proposal which will be noted as part of the minutes of the meeting and included in the Consultation Report which will be presented to Cabinet as part of the decision-making process.

6. PROGRESS IN WORKING WITH SCHOOLS TO EMBED APPROACHES TO MEET THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE THAT IMPACT ON REDUCING EXCLUSIONS.

Councillor C. Andrews (Cabinet Member for Education and Communities) introduced the report which provided an update for Members of the progress of the Local Authority education department support teams in working with schools to embed approaches to meet the needs of children and young people that impact on reducing exclusions. The report also aimed to provide an update on current exclusion rates.

A Member queried how pupils are selected for intervention purposes and whether the services will still be available to pupils when the project ends. Members were advised that schools select their own pupils as they are well known to them. The Member also queried whether the pupils were aware of these services. Members were advised that all the services would continue to be available to the pupils and would not be time limited. Members were also informed of recent work undertaken with the Youth Forum to design a survey regarding the well-being interventions that are available.

A Member sought clarification on how Caerphilly County Borough Council compares with other Local Authorities in Wales. Members were advised that currently the Council's data did not compare well from a national perspective, but officers assured the Committee that work to address exclusion issues was being undertaken. Members were also advised that Local Authorities host events to share 'good practice.' It was also noted that the level of exclusions since the Covid-19 pandemic was a national issue, and that associated challenges faced by children needed to be addressed by schools.

A Member queried whether exclusion of a pupil is carried out where bullying has occurred. Members were advised that where a 'fixed term' exclusion applies, restorative sessions could be undertaken with the pupils involved. Where a permanent exclusion occurs, the education psychology service can become involved and determine the best option for the pupil going forward. Discussion followed regarding bullying in schools and the support given to the children who are being bullied. Members were assured that the relevant support should be available to all pupils involved.

A Member queried the Welsh Government funding available for interventions for a 3-year period. Members were advised that in-house training has been given to schools to promote sustainability if the WG funding were to cease at the end of the 3-year period. The Education psychology service would continue to support schools where needed.

Following consideration of the information contained in the report, the Education and Social Services Scrutiny Committee offered views and comments, and it was moved and seconded

that the recommendation be approved. By way of Microsoft Forms, this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED to:

Endorse the approach taken by the LA to embed approaches to meet the needs of children and young people that impact on reducing exclusions.

7. PUPIL ATTENDANCE.

Councillor C. Andrews (Cabinet Member for Education and Communities) introduced the report which provided Members with an overview of the strategies currently being developed to improve pupil attendance, and advised Members that this is identified as a main priority for improvement in the 'Pursuing Excellence Together' education strategy.

A Member noted that attendance figures did not consider the reasons for absence, and that parents could receive a 'red' letter when their child has been genuinely ill, and the school has been notified. Members were advised that if a child is unwell, they should not be in school, however attendance in school is a priority and it was acknowledged that a child's attendance at school affects their opportunities in the future. Discussion followed regarding absence monitoring and the reasons being sought where 'patterns' of absence occur, i.e., a child may be absent on the same day each week/month. The Member sought clarification on the FPN (Fixed Penalty Notice) process and the level of attendance before this is used. Members were advised that this process is used as a 'last resort' and prior to this the school would have had ongoing discussions with parents to determine the reason for absence, and the most appropriate way forward to resolve any issues. In the event that a school wishes to use the FPN process, this has to be approved by the governing body of the school and can only be used if it is in the schools' attendance policy. Members were also advised that only 13 notices had been issued this academic year and contact between the parents and the CCBC Education Welfare Officers would remain ongoing throughout the process.

A Member sought clarification on the number of pupils going on family holidays during school term time and whether this had reduced. Members were advised that guidance from Welsh Government is that a pupil can take up to 10 days holiday in exceptional circumstances which would reduce their attendance level to around 90%. The decision is made by the headteacher of the individual school as they would consider the pupils' family circumstances.

A Member queried whether the FPN fines are all paid, and the action undertaken for any unpaid fines. Members were provided with information regarding Fixed Penalty Notices and Non-School Attendance Prosecutions. Members were advised that the prosecutions could result in an increased fine of up to £2,500 and the parent would then also have a criminal record. The Member also sought clarification on pupils who receive free school meals having the lowest attendance levels, and whether FPNs would be suitable, considering the financial circumstances of the family. Members were advised that the school would issue the FPN if they deemed this appropriate and any unpaid FPN would then be referred to the Education Welfare department, where ongoing contact would continue with the family, including meetings with the school to resolve any issues. Members were assured that the issue of a FPN would always be the 'last resort' when dealing with pupil attendance.

A Member queried how attendance is recorded by a school and, in particular whether this is monitored to confirm that the reason for absence is recorded correctly. Members were advised that the Education Welfare Service obtain data from school registers and undertake spot checks to ensure registers are accurate. Training is provided in workshops, for school clerks, family liaison officers, and headteachers so that the required information is recorded correctly.

A Member requested information on the attendance seminars attended by headteachers. Members were advised that this was a new initiative specifically for headteachers in addition to the workshops attended by other staff members. Members were informed that the first seminar had been held in the Spring following an Estyn report on attendance and best practice to get pupils back into school. The second seminar covered new guidance regarding reduced timetables and both seminars were attended by approximately 60 headteachers out of 86 schools.

A Member sought clarification on the high level of pupils with severe cases of anxiety and whether this was included in the attendance figures. Members were advised that the strategy followed regarding attendance includes contact with the family and whether there are any actions that could be taken to resolve any attendance issues. The Member queried whether schools recognise a pupil suffering with anxiety issues in a timely manner. Members were advised that schools are provided with a strategy toolkit in order to assess the child and to determine the school interventions that can be used to increase the level of school attendance for that child.

A Member queried whether available resources were affected by attendance and self-evaluation of schools, including the 'team around the school' process. Members were advised that the self-evaluation process included an Officer visit to schools, and discussions with the governing body to determine the situation at that particular school, which is then followed up with a report by the Officer to the school. Members were advised that it is proposed to cover all secondary schools by the end of this academic year.

A Member sought clarification on children 'missing in education' and whether this referred to children moving out of the area. Members were advised that following statutory guidance from Welsh Government this covers children who are not registered anywhere for education. This could be caused by movement between schools or outside of the Borough or UK, or homeschooling where the child has never been registered at a school. Members were also advised that Welsh Government is producing a database for information sharing purposes in order to locate these children if they are living within the County Borough.

A Member enquired whether Service children are 'tracked' as they can relocate frequently due to the nature of their family circumstances. Members were advised that these children are 'tracked' within schools as they are included in vulnerable groups. Members were also advised that all attendance data following the self-evaluation process is shared with schools. The Member also noted that Welsh Government funding is available to those schools who have service children registered. Members were advised that this information has been shared with schools, and that there is a designated officer within CCBC who is the lead link for service children.

Following consideration of the report, the Education and Social Services Scrutiny Committee noted the impact of strategies to improve pupil attendance and Members had the opportunity to ask questions, seek further clarification and offer views.

The meeting closed at 7.15 pm.

Approved as a correct record, subject to any amendments agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 16th July 2024.

CHAIR