

Date: 28 December 2022

My Ref: CYP/Covid19_Recovery/Dec22



County Hall
Cardiff,
CF10 4UW
Tel: (029) 2087 2087

Neuadd y Sir
Caerdydd,
CF10 4UW
Ffôn: (029) 2087 2088

Councillor Sarah Merry
Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Education
County Hall
Atlantic Wharf
CARDIFF
CF10 4UW

Dear Sarah,

CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 13 DECEMBER 2022 - COVID-19 RECOVERY IN SCHOOLS

Please accept my thanks on behalf of the Committee for attending the Children & Young People Scrutiny Committee to facilitate the consideration of the Covid-19 Recovery in Schools issue, which is a priority topic for the Committee. Please pass on our thanks to Mel Godfrey and Mike Tate and extend a further thanks to Patrick Brunnock, Claire Skidmore and Michelle Jones.

On behalf of the Committee, I again would like to share our appreciation, gratitude and support to all school staff and those within the LA who have supported them. The presentations we received were sobering and emotional, but equally uplifting and inspiring. The sheer scale of what everyone has done to go above and beyond in supporting each other, pupils, families and the wider community is incredible; but we also acknowledge the tremendous stress, anxiety and “burn out” faced by schools’ staff. I will address this in more detail later in this letter, but I wanted to give you assurances that this Scrutiny Committee hear your concerns; recognise the pressures you face; and will do everything it can to support you all going forward. I intend to write to Heads directly to pass on this message.

As you stated at the meeting, we don’t ultimately know what “long shadow” the impact of covid will be, and the effect across different groups of young people, particularly those who are disadvantaged.

With this in mind, Members agreed that they would wish to receive a further update from everyone who attended the December meeting, including the Head Teachers present. We suggest that this be at our **July 2023** meeting (date to be confirmed), following the completion of exams.

From now until that time, we will gather further evidence, research and intelligence to enable us to help you, the Children & Young People Recovery Board and wider stakeholder groups in addressing some of the issues you have raised with us. We will require your assistance and co-operation in this work, but we hope we can assist you in bringing this work together at a central point. We have also agreed that this issue will remain a priority for the Committee for the foreseeable future, possibly developing into a collaborative piece of work to run alongside formal committee business.

We agreed that schools cannot do this on their own and that partnership working is vital. We wish to identify some key partners with schools to also address us at the July meeting to gain a shared perspective of the issues. We will ensure that colleagues from Children's Services are invited but would appreciate officers and Head Teachers supplying a list of other key partners (including contact details), so they can also be invited to the meeting.

The following views and observations were raised by Members during the Way Forward part of the meeting. We would wish for a "year-end" perspective on these issues to be brought back to the July meeting but would also welcome any initial thoughts on them in response to this letter, or as requested. We understand there is overlap in many of the issues we raise in this letter but have set the issues under a range of headings for ease of reference.

Children & Young People Recovery Board

Members were informed of the work of the Children & Young People Recovery Board, which will not just be looking at data, but the wider impact of Covid and noted that this Board does not have a finite date, which is welcomed. Members would be interested in receiving further information on who sits on this Board and what its remit/terms of reference are. What are its priorities and work streams? Members would be interested in supporting the work of the Board and would welcome some information on how we could do so.

It was agreed at the meeting that the increasing complexities faced by schools require multi-layered support both at strategic and operational levels. Therefore, we would welcome the Board's views on Cardiff 2030; requirements of the new curriculum and the Cardiff Commitment in recovery at a strategic level; and how it will develop partnerships and draw on support across city and beyond.

Working Together

As we have already stated, schools and the LA cannot overcome their challenges alone, and that partnership working will be critical in doing this. Some of the messages we received during the meeting included:

- Assistance from Welsh and UK Government in relation to funding; engagement and re-engagement of pupils; retaining staff; dealing with additional pressures as a result of the pandemic that are continuing
- At primary level – lower numbers of visits from health workers
- The need for more support for the family, which needs to be consistent; face to face and specialist services available.
- The need for help and assistance at lower levels – early intervention for those who do not meet thresholds

Funding

Members heard about a range of grants and funding made available throughout the pandemic period, particularly RRRS. We also heard about Thrive and Nurture provision.

However, the Committee agreed that investment was needed to address the additional demand in schools. Members also agreed that there had been a reliance on grants and there was a need to look at funding going forward.

At the time of the meeting, the Council was waiting on the Welsh Government financial settlement, and now this has been done, the Committee would welcome further information on WG settlement and what this will mean for schools.

Furthermore, the Committee would wish to communicate its support regarding additional demand and the need for an effective financial model. Sustainability of resources, particularly as there are additional demands being placed on schools still and base-school budgets are insufficient to cover the additional need.

Policies, Systems and Processes

Members welcomed the news that the new curriculum had presented a new focus for schools. We also welcome the move away from high stakes data and “get behind the figures” regarding a range of issues including attendance, safeguarding etc. Underpinning this will be the need to ensure that effective policies, systems and processes are in place across all schools. An update on these will be welcomed at the July meeting – particularly the rolling out of research undertaken by Radyr Primary in addressing some of the challenges raised at the meeting.

Attendance

Throughout the meeting, Members asked a range of questions regarding attendance. We noted the attendance figures presented at the meeting and heard that persistent and inconsistent absence present huge issues in terms of consistency of learning and attainment; and would commend the EWS Team in their continuation of intensive engagement with individuals, schools and families.

It was reported that persistent absence reviews had been undertaken across schools and welcomed the news that attendance would remain a focus.

Members asked questions on some of the reasons for absence and requested some data on this. This included an indication of how widespread the problem of anxiety is for pupils and/or their families; what numbers/percentage of pupils are still affected; and how persistent a problem it continues to be. Whilst they accepted the responses to this query, Members would like to receive an update on this issue at the July meeting, and if available at the present, any up-to-date information on this.

Access and attainment for all

Members asked a few questions relating to access to education and attainment for all. Members wanted to lend their support to the commitment of ***“no child being left behind”***.

Members were concerned that there appears to be a widening gap across low and high achievers; and had already raised the issue of those pupils at AS and A Level who had not sat exams at GCSE level feeling “worth less”, though were assured by Mike in his presentation and Patrick in Corpus Christi, that there didn’t appear to be a decrease in grades at Year 11. Members would wish to be kept abreast of developments in this area and would request that an update be given on this issue at the July meeting, to include (if possible) a further breakdown of data across low, medium and high achievers to gauge where problems may be presenting themselves, and if particular schools/areas of the city were affected.

Members heard about the specialist teams working with schools; and the Fair Access Panel and welcomed the work being undertaken in this area.

Referrals

Throughout the meeting, Members were told there had been a significant increase in a range of referrals to a number of services, including Children's Services and Health.

Members were very concerned with the waiting times reported to them (for example, 13 months on the neuro pathways waiting list).

As already stated, Members would wish to gain a better understanding of the range of agencies working with schools and would welcome a detailed list of who the agencies are. We would also appreciate any information on what services the agencies offer, and the standard waiting times stated by them. In contrast, if there is any information on the reality of waiting times, that would also be welcomed.

Health and the University Health Board were consistently mentioned throughout the meeting, and Members would wish to know whether there was any role for the Council (and this Scrutiny Committee) in negotiating with Health on these matters, whether through the PSB, Regional Partnership Board, Safeguarding Board etc. We will invite the CAMHS service to the July meeting for their views.

We also asked questions about whether any processes were in places for "lower level" referrals, to agencies such as Occupational Therapy, and would recommend that this be explored and reported back to the July meeting.

Development and Behaviour

We noted anecdotal evidence on behaviours and that some pupils had missed out on a range of experiences both in and out of school. We also observed evidence from primary heads that significant numbers at nursery/foundation and KS2 were not meeting milestones and were developmentally delayed.

We were made aware of anecdotal evidence that play had been rougher and more physical and asked for reasons why that had happened.

We noted the increase in exclusions and these being social, emotional and community issues – particularly with older pupils. We noted that the behaviour was dysfunctional violent behaviour peer on peer, and to members of staff.

We welcomed the increase in Pastoral Support Plans to bring pupils back into school and this is monitored.

All of the above are of concern to Members and we would welcome an update on the above at the July meeting.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Members noted that demand for schools-based counselling outstrips capacity, with an increase in 180 pupils, including self-referral to KOOTH. We heard about developments around EmPower; and the Single Point of Contact.

We recognise the links between learning and well-being and have raised this issue at previous meetings. The Committee are keen to support schools in helping to build capacity in this area, but understand the range of challenges in doing this, including difficulties in recruiting in this area.

Vulnerable Learners

Members welcomed an update on the Vulnerable Pupils Panel but remain concerned by those young people who have completely disengaged.

As you may be aware, this Scrutiny Committee will be commencing an Inquiry in the New Year into those EOTAS being vulnerable to criminal exploitation and we will pick up some of the issues raised at the meeting. We noted the following in relation to his cohort:

- A rise in these young people displaying behavioural, social and emotional difficulties.
- numbers increasing by 14%.
- an increase in population by 10%.
- a rise in referrals.
- Attendance for EOTAS – just under 70%.
- Exhausted places for this cohort.
- A need to building capacity within the system.
- Plan to double provision in the Carnegie Centre.

Exclusions

Members noted that both fixed and permanent exclusions had increased in the secondary sector but had decreased in primary and special schools. Members would wish to receive a further update on exclusions at the July meeting

Support for Staff

As already stated, the Committee were overwhelmed with the evidence presented to them in relation to how staff had gone to extraordinary lengths to look after and safeguard the young people in their care. We were extremely touched by stories of teachers calling and visiting families weekly; senior staff being “on call”; delivering

food parcels; giving laptops and computers to families etc. A special mention should be given to Mike Tate, who all three Heads thanked for his support, advice and guidance.

However, we also recognised the toll taken on staff throughout the pandemic and beyond. “Burn out” was a message that came through, and staff reassessing their lives and leaving jobs after pandemic.

Given the continuing pressures on staff, we want to flag up this concern, and would encourage the Council to monitor staff retention, with an update being reported to us in July.

Lessons Learned

Members were given a range of examples of lessons learned from the pandemic including

- Structure of the school day
- Better relationship between the LA and schools
- Digital approach
- Knowing pupils better
- Cluster relationships via hubs – could this be widened to BP?
- Working practices – different ways of interacting with pupils
- Increased intelligence
- Cross-directorate working

We asked about any policies that could need reviewing in the light of a similar situation happening again, and the use of masks was flagged, particularly the emotional impact on children and young people, particularly those with ALN. We also heard that teachers didn’t want to wear them; and younger children were scared of them. With this in mind, we would want to flag that, should these discussions arise in the future, this is communicated to ministers setting policy.

To recap, we request the following:

1. Agreement that yourself, officers and heads come back to this scrutiny committee in July 2023 to update us on issues relating to:
 - Attendance
 - Access and attainment for all
 - Referrals
 - Development and Behaviour
 - Mental Health and Wellbeing
 - Vulnerable Learners
 - Exclusions

- Support for Staff

2. Please provide the following information in response to this letter:

- Further information on the Children & Young People Recovery Board, including its membership; its remit/terms of reference; What are its priorities and work streams? How this Committee can support the work of the Board.
- The CYP Recovery Board's views on Cardiff 2030; requirements of the new curriculum and the Cardiff Commitment in recovery at a strategic level; and how it will develop partnerships and draw on support across city and beyond.
- Supplying a list of key partners (including contact details) dealing with schools and the LA. If possible, this should include information on what services the agencies offer, and the standard waiting times stated by them.
- further information on WG financial settlement and what this will mean for schools.
- Any further information into reasons why anxiety is a problem for pupils and/or their families; how widespread it is; what numbers/percentage of pupils are still affected; and how persistent a problem it continues to be.
- Views on the challenges faced in building capacity of mental health and well-being services.

There are no formal recommendations arising from this letter

I hope you find our comments useful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L. BRIDGEMAN', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

COUNCILLOR LEE BRIDGEMAN

Chairperson – Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

CC: CYPSC Members

Melanie Godfrey - Director of Education & Lifelong Learning

Mike Tate - Assistant Director of Education & Lifelong Learning

Patrick Brunnock - Head Teacher, Corpus Christi RC High School

Claire Skidmore - Head Teacher, Radyr Primary School

Michelle Jones – Head Teacher, Lansdowne Primary School

Gary Jones - Head of Democratic Services

Melanie Jackson - PA to the Deputy Leader

Helen Eager - PA to the Director of Education & Lifelong Learning

Louise Spain - PA to the Assistant Director of Education & Lifelong Learning

Tim Gordon and Jeremy Rhys – Media and Comms

David Hugh Thomas – Chair Governance & Audit Committee