

Special Educational Needs Joint Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on 9 January 2015

PRESENT: Councillor E. Caerwyn Roberts (Chair)

Gwynedd Council

Councillors Annwen Hughes, Elin Walker Jones, Beth Lawton,
Eirwyn Williams

Isle of Anglesey County Council

Councillors Derlwyn Hughes, Gwilym O. Jones, R. Meirion Jones,
Ieuan Williams

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr Gareth Payne (Principal Educational Psychologist)
Mr Iwan Trefor Jones (Corporate Director – Gwynedd Council)
Dr Gwynne Jones (Director of Lifelong Learning – Isle of Anglesey County Council)
Mrs Orina Pritchard (Senior Delivery Officer for Transforming ALN Services and Inclusion – Gwynedd Council (for item 7))
Mr Gareth Jackson (Education Officer – Gwynedd Council)
Mrs Kathy Bell (Senior Education Accountant – Gwynedd Council)
Ann Holmes (Committee Officer – Isle of Anglesey County Council)

APOLOGIES: Councillor Peter Read (Gwynedd Council), Councillors Llinos Medi Huws, J. Arwel Roberts (Isle of Anglesey County Council), Mr Rheinallt Thomas (Free Churches)

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Gareth Thomas (Portfolio Member for Education – Gwynedd Council), Eleri Llewelyn Owen (Project Officer) (for item 7)

1 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

No declaration of interest was received.

2 MINUTES 19TH SEPTEMBER, 2014 MEETING

The minutes of the previous meeting of the Special Educational Needs Joint Committee held on 19 September 2014 were submitted and confirmed as correct.

3 SEN PROVIDER UNIT

A report was submitted by the Principal Educational Psychologist outlining the situation in the SEN Provider Unit during the 2014 Summer term.

The Principal Educational Psychologist reported on the staff situation of the three teams within the Provider Unit – the Administrative Service, the Specialist Teachers Service and the Educational Psychology Service. He elaborated on the composition of the teams at the end of the term and clarified the impact of any gaps in services due to staff absences and particularly in the context of the Specialist Teachers Service and the actions taken to mitigate such absences, to strengthen the team and ensure seamless continuity of service for schools. The Officer noted that the Administrative team was working at full capacity at the end of the term, as was the Educational

Psychology Team, with the psychologists providing services for the schools and the assistant psychologists working on specific pieces of work as described in the report.

The Principal Educational Psychologist referred to the Provider Unit's operational model, namely that the educational psychologists work directly with the schools on a responsive basis whilst the specialist teachers engage with them in a less conspicuous manner. The administrative team manages the procedures in connection with children who receive additional support.

The Joint Committee considered the information submitted and whilst it acknowledged that the staff situation had stabilised and that it appreciates the additional input from staff to cover for absences where necessary, a comment was made that the Joint-Committee would have welcomed more narrative on the nature of the work undertaken with children, the output in terms of contributing to children's progress and the additional value it provides. It was enquired whether recruiting difficulties are hindering the provision for children who need additional support, and whether the staff situation in relation to language, speech and communication difficulties is able to address the growth in demand in this area. The Principal Educational Psychologist stated that he does not believe that the staff situation is hindering the ability to provide an exemplary service and that the staffing situation at the Provider Unit was nearly at full complement during the Summer term. The Head of Learning of the Isle of Anglesey County Council referred to the Authority's language difficulty units and that specialist teachers are working side by side with language therapists to meet the need in Anglesey.

It was resolved to accept the above information and note the situation in the Provider Unit during the 2014 Summer term.

ACTION POINT ARISING: The Principal Educational Psychologist to include information on the nature of the work undertaken with children in the next report.

4 FINANCIAL SITUATION AND BUDGETARY CUTS

The Director of Lifelong Learning of the Isle of Anglesey County Council reported that it had been mentioned at the previous meeting that every service in the Council had been requested to identify savings up to the value of 10% as part of the Council's budget setting process for 2015/16. It was mentioned at the time that this could impact upon the Special Educational Needs Joint Committee in 2015/16. He stated that the financial pressures had not reduced and that he could therefore confirm that the Isle of Anglesey County Council will be implementing a cut of 10% in its contribution to the Joint Committee's budget for 2015/16. In relation to a question as to the areas in which the Joint Committee would be expected to make cuts, the Director of Lifelong Learning observed that that discussion had not taken place as yet. Efficiency savings would be identified initially before looking at individual services but that discussion has yet to take place.

The members of the Joint Committee expressed discomfort regarding the possible impact of cuts on a vulnerable cohort of children and it was suggested that cutting provision could have further implications in the form of higher costs when more timely and earlier intervention would have prevented that.

The Portfolio Holder for Education of Gwynedd Council reported that Gwynedd is currently reviewing additional learning needs in their entirety rather than cutting a percentage of the budget and that a draft strategy to that end had been included on the agenda for the meeting.

The Senior Education Accountant of Gwynedd Council observed that since the Joint Committee was established in 1996, the two Counties have been jointly funding the organisation and have been in agreement in terms of their approach to cuts. It may be necessary to review the provision if either of the counties deviates from the agreed procedures.

The Director of Lifelong Learning of Anglesey County Council reported that funding the Joint Committee had been the subject of debate for some time and that he understands that it is intended to move in the same direction. If Gwynedd Council's strategy is likely to mean the introduction of changes then it will need to be considered in the context of the Joint Committee, but it is unlikely that Anglesey's intentions in terms of implementing cuts will change.

It was enquired whether it was possible to use the Joint Committee's balances to make up for any financial deficit. The Senior Education Accountant of Gwynedd Council reported that there are already considerable commitments against the reserve funds.

It was resolved to note the information and the Isle of Anglesey County Council's current financial position.

NO ACTION POINT ARISING.

5 FINANCIAL REPORT - REVIEW OF THE 2014/15 ACCOUNTS

The Senior Educational Accountant Gwynedd Council circulated a report summarising the position in relation to the 2014/15 budget as follows:

- At the end of 2013/14, the balances of the SEN Joint Committee were £277,000. During 2014/15 staff changes had led to an overspend of approximately £68,000 against the 2014/15 staff budget.
- Compensation and legal costs of £25,000 had been paid to a former member of staff as a follow-up to bringing an equality case against the Joint Committee.
- There are training costs equivalent to £15,000 as part of the strategy to secure a supply of qualified staff for the future.
- There had been an increase of nearly £9,000 in service and rent costs following a review of the costs and use of the current offices. The Joint Committee will shortly be relocating to alternative offices in Caernarfon at a one-off cost of approximately £5,000. The element of the relocation cost in 2014/15 will be borne by Gwynedd Council. It is estimated that the whole year cost of the new offices will be approximately £20,000 higher than the Joint Committee's budget in 2015/16 and savings will have to be identified to fund them.
- An overspend on staff travel costs of approximately £5,000 was projected by the end of the year.
- An overspend of approximately £7,000 was projected on resource costs, advertising 2013/14 final accounts and postage costs.
- There is a deficit of approximately £7,000 on income generation mainly due to the staff situation and lack of capacity to deliver any training as has happened in the past.
- The impact of the changes and investments during the year means that approximately £143,000 of the Joint Committee's balances will need to be used in 2014/15 leaving approximately £134,000 by 31 March 2015.

It was confirmed that the Officers would be meeting to discuss the situation with regard to the 2015/16 budget.

It was resolved to accept the report and note the position.

NO FURTHER ACTION POINT ARISING

6 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

It was considered and resolved under the relevant legislation to exclude the press and the public from the meeting during the discussion on the item below for the reasons given in the public interest test submitted.

7 GWYNEDD COUNCIL STRATEGY FOR ADDITIONAL LEARNING NEEDS AND INCLUSION

A report was submitted by the Corporate Director of Gwynedd Council incorporating the Council's draft Strategy for the transformation of additional learning needs in order to deliver the following outputs for children and young people who have additional learning needs:

- That children receive the correct type of support and intervention in early years.
- Children receive the best possible educational experiences and, as a result, are able to realize their potential and receive the best opportunities in life.

- That children receive a quality service from multi-disciplinary and multi-agency teams across Anglesey who work and plan together and who provide clear advice and information for the parents of every child.
- That children receive their education in a high quality learning environment (particularly children with complex and acute needs) and that the best possible use is made of the new ALN Excellence Centre.

The Educational Portfolio Holder for Gwynedd Council reported that the draft submitted was the culmination of a review of Additional Learning Needs generally. The Strategy will be the subject of consultation from 19 January until the end of February 2015 prior to its final submission to the Joint Committee and subsequently to the Cabinet of Gwynedd Council during April 2015. The Strategy was motivated by several factors including legislative changes; the desire to give more attention to children in their early years and earlier interventions; the programme for developing the Centre of Excellence in Gwynedd and the need to make optimal use of scarce resources. The desire is to bring all aspects of the ALN provision together in an integrated team.

The Corporate Director of Gwynedd Council endorsed the above comments and elaborated on the reasons for the review and the desired outcome of creating a more efficient and effective service which responds appropriately and in a timely fashion to the needs of children and young people in Gwynedd.

The Senior Delivery Officer for Transforming ALN Services and Inclusion at Gwynedd Council gave a visual presentation elaborating on the individual actions to be taken to realise the four key objectives/outcomes noted above.

The Joint Committee's Principal Educational Psychologist declared that he was disappointed with the proposal in the Strategy to decommission the Special Educational Needs Joint Committee particularly in terms of ensuring clarity in relation to responsibilities and accountability; he felt that this was possible within the structure of the Joint Committee and that it already operates as a specialist centre for both counties.

Anglesey's representatives also expressed their disappointment that an opportunity had not been afforded to shape the Strategy on the basis of joint planning as partners. It was noted that the Williams Report encourages collaboration between Authorities on a wider scale, which is what the Joint Committee has been undertaking constructively since its establishment. It was suggested that the partnership is now being weakened in that Gwynedd Council is setting out its own vision for the provision within that county specifically.

The Director of Lifelong Learning of Anglesey County Council observed that the Strategy includes initial ideas that need to be considered in terms of their impact on Anglesey and in order to perceive a way forward. The principles espoused by both counties for the service are similar in the sense that both counties are anxious to ensure the best experiences and outcomes for children with additional learning needs. Anglesey's viewpoint was highlighted at the previous meeting, namely that it did not wish to see the Joint Committee being disbanded but rather to see its work being consolidated through the medium of a more robust and detailed Service Level Agreement. Although this continues to be the opinion, there is a desire to examine the proposals in Gwynedd Council's draft Strategy to look for common ground for moving forward. The Joint Committee was established in 1996 as a mechanism for collaboration on a broad level and in order to share scarce bilingual expertise in the area of additional learning needs. Separating the link would lead to a risk that both authorities would be competing for the same staff. In terms of Anglesey, there is a continuing commitment to collaborate but to a purpose. To that end, it was agreed to convene a further meeting to ascertain which elements of the Strategy's vision both counties share and how that benefits Anglesey.

In the ensuing discussion the following general points were raised:

- There was an acceptance of the underlying principles of the Strategy, namely to secure the best outcomes for children with additional learning needs and to do so in an effective and efficient manner. However, reservations were expressed with regard to the cost of implementing the Strategy, particularly in light of the commitment made in the document e.g. investment in

strengthening provision in the early years and upskilling staff. It was noted that there was no clear evidence of where savings could be found.

- The document was not clear in terms of the governance arrangements of the new system and whether it would be happening on the basis of both counties separately.
- That there was concern that both Authorities could find themselves in a situation of competing for specialist staff leading to the disintegration of the current team and the specialisms therein.
- Whilst Gwynedd welcomed the concept of having one central point, concern was expressed that there would be additional pressure on schools and greater expectations on the nursery provision without sufficient investment in the provision. This would, in turn, make it difficult to identify children with additional learning needs at an earlier stage as desired in the Strategy.
- It was enquired whether the new arrangement would improve the relationship with the Health Service and ensure earlier input from them.

The Corporate Director of Gwynedd Council clarified that the Strategy was in no way a criticism of the effectiveness of the Joint Committee but was rather an attempt to build on the strengths of that entity by establishing a multi-agency and a multi-disciplinary central team. The review is a systematic and dedicated review of the whole subject and has been carefully planned. It was acknowledged that some of the proposals had associated costs but Gwynedd Council wishes to invest on a one-off basis in order to implement elements of the strategy e.g. training staff and upskilling the workforce. Some of the proposals also entail changing and adapting how resources are used so that they better reflect the Council's priorities such as by targeting early years. It is projected that implementing the proposals in the strategy will lead to annual permanent savings of £1.1m by 2021/22 and an element of those savings will be derived from Gwynedd Council's contribution to the Joint Committee. The Officer explained that there was an opportunity to present further comments on the document during the consultation period if so desired.

It was resolved to note Gwynedd Council's draft Strategy for Additional Learning Needs and Inclusion and to also note that further discussions will be held between both counties thereon.

NO ACTION POINT ARISING

8 NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the next meeting of the Joint Committee would be held at 10.30am on Friday, 13 March 2015 in Llangefni.

**Councillor E. Caerwyn Roberts
Chair**