

Special Educational Needs Joint Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on 18 November 2016

- PRESENT:** Councillor Llinos Medi Huws (**Isle of Anglesey County Council**) (Chair)
Gwynedd Council
Councillors Elin Walker Jones, Caerwyn Roberts, Eirwyn Williams
- IN ATTENDANCE:** Principal Educational Psychologist (Mr Gareth Payne)
Senior Inclusion Manager (Mr Gwern ap Rhisiart) (Gwynedd Council)
ALN Education Officer (Dr Einir Thomas) (IOACC)
Project Manager (Eleri Llewelyn) (Gwynedd Council)
Senior Education Accountant (Mrs Kathy Bell) (Gwynedd Council)
Committee Officer (Ann Holmes) (IOACC)
- APOLOGIES:** Councillors Annwen Hughes, Beth Lawton (Gwynedd Council)
Councillors Derlwyn Hughes, Gwilym O. Jones, R. Meirion Jones (IOACC)
Councillor Kenneth Hughes (Portfolio Member for Education – IOACC)
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1 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

No declaration of interest was received.

2 MINUTES OF THE 23 SEPTEMBER, 2016 MEETING

The minutes of the previous meeting of the Special Educational Needs Joint-Committee held on 23 September, 2016, were presented and confirmed as correct.

3 SEN PROVIDER UNIT

The report of the Principal Educational Psychologist setting out the work of the services within the Provider Unit during the period since June, 2016 was presented for the Joint-Committee's consideration.

The Principal Educational Psychologist highlighted the following matters:

- That due to the absence of the Service Manager and also the extended absence of an experienced administrative officer, some pressures have been experienced by the Administration Services Team which is responsible for administering the assessment and review processes. The remaining staff members have taken on some of the additional responsibilities and the service has continued to meet the demands placed upon it. Members of the team have taken part in training in Person Centred Planning Techniques (PCP) in preparation for the implementation of the new legislation that will expect Welsh Education Authorities to utilise these techniques when they consider the additional learning needs of children. PCP techniques seek to ensure that the individual child with additional learning needs is the focus of review meetings and fully participates in them. It is anticipated that this new way of conducting review meetings will also ensure more detail and consistency in the nature and amount of additional help that children receive.
- Members of the specialist teaching service have also attended the PCP Techniques training and together with the Education Psychologists they will be working with schools to promote this approach and to ensure consistency in the way review meetings are held. One specialist teacher for hearing impairment has left the service for a post in another county.

- That following the secondment of a member of the service to work on the joint ALN and Inclusion Strategy, the Educational Psychology Service has an additional member of staff. The service has continued to provide support for the two authorities' schools including working with individual children, consulting on matters involving additional learning needs and providing training within schools at their request.
- Statistical data for the past 10 years from 2006 to 2016 shows that the number of statements of special educational needs issued in both counties has not reduced to such an extent as to indicate a permanent downward trend. The ratio between Anglesey and Gwynedd varies, and whilst Anglesey has experienced a sustained period when the percentage of statements issued in the county was below 40%, the percentage level for both 2014/15 and 2015/16 was lower in Gwynedd at 49% and 39% respectively compared to 51% and 61% for Anglesey. Most statements are completed within the statutory 26 weeks when the delays caused by the late receipt of information from personnel from outside the Education Authorities are discounted. The percentage of statements completed within the 26 weeks statutory timescale without exceptions is on average 95% for Gwynedd and 94% for Anglesey. When exceptions are taken into account, the average percentage for Gwynedd is 71% and 67% for Anglesey.

The Joint-Committee considered the information presented and raised the following issues:

- The Joint-Committee noted that due to sickness absence, the Administrative Service has been experiencing additional pressure and it sought assurance that the team has been provided with appropriate support to enable it to carry out its duties effectively during this period.

The Joint-Committee was informed that the Senior Inclusion Manager and Anglesey's ALN Education Officer have been looking at the management of the Joint-Committee for some time and that some of the Administrative Service Manager's responsibilities have transferred to the Inclusion Team within the Gwynedd Education Service. There is also an ongoing effort to reduce the number of statements in Gwynedd and Anglesey, to move to electronic systems and to simplify processes thereby reducing bureaucracy as well as the volume of work for the remaining administrative staff. There is also an increasing move towards the adoption of Individual Development Plans (IDP). Paper files have all been scanned and transferred to Cloud storage. There is also now a designated Officer in the Human Resources Department in Anglesey acting as a specific point of contact thereby facilitating communication.

- The Joint-Committee noted the loss of the services of a Specialist Hearing Impairment Teacher and it sought clarification of the potential impact on the service as a result of the departure to another post of the individual concerned.

The Joint-Committee was informed that there has been a marginal reduction in service. The criteria for accessing the services have been reviewed and the authorities are taking a planned approach and are looking at what the long term requirements are likely to be across the spectrum of ALN services and are not just reacting to the needs of the immediate present. A forum has also been set up in the wake of the new ALN Strategy which will accelerate the speed with which cases are dealt with. Additionally, there is ongoing discussion with the individual services as part of the consultation on the ALN Strategy so if a need arises in the interim period consideration can be given to finding a temporary option. Increasing attention is being given to how appropriate the services given have been. It could be said the Joint-Committee has in the past been generous in its response and in the way it has sought to meet needs and in the way it has monitored the suitability of the provision made, especially with regard to less acute needs.

- The Joint-Committee noted that there have been difficulties historically in appointing bilingual educational psychologists and it sought clarification whether this situation still applies and whether there are any new approaches being taken to improve recruitment to the service.

The Joint-Committee was informed that an ALN Implementation Group has been established as part of the process of bringing in the new legislation and that the Welsh Government plans to fund a training scheme with a view to extending the training centre beyond the facility currently in Cardiff. One of the performance indicators for the course for educational psychologists and specialist teachers will be the number of Welsh speakers. This proposal is currently under consideration and there is a local input to that discussion. The Joint-Committee has committed to training two

educational psychologists who will be available to the service by the summer at a considerable cost and at a risk in the event there are no posts available to them.

- The Joint-Committee sought clarification of what is driving down the number of statements in Gwynedd.

The Joint-Committee was informed that schools in Gwynedd are being prepared for the implementation of the Additional Learning Needs and Tribunal (Wales) Bill. Some requests for additional support are being referred to the Moderation Panels directly thus providing parents with the opportunity of moving immediately to an Individual Development Plan for their child without the need for statutory assessment which in turn releases staff to undertake other work. During the summer a detailed implementation plan was put in place encompassing schools, the Joint-Committee and staff beyond to inform all parties of the new working procedures. However, the legal entitlements of parents have not changed and they retain the legal right to request a statement of need if they so wish. The majority prefer an individual development plan as a more practical and effective route to obtain help and support and while the volume of needs has not reduced, the means by which needs are being met have changed.

- The Joint-Committee noted that it would be helpful and informative if the number of children on an Individual Development Plan could be shown in future reporting on the SEN Provider Unit data so that the effectiveness of the IDP may be better gauged. Additionally, the data should provide an idea of how many children the exceptions cover to help the Joint-Committee understand the actual numbers behind the percentages.

The Joint-Committee was informed that a delayed response by the Health Service has historically accounted for missing the statutory timeframe for issuing statements especially in Anglesey. Discussions have been held with the Health Service's Language Therapists and agreement reached that there should be no need to re-issue reports completed in the previous six months. Also the model under the new ALN Strategy encompasses both Language Therapists and CAMHS thus ensuring the involvement of Health Service practitioners in the process from the outset. The demography of schools has changed considerably over the past 10 years and since the establishment of the Joint-Committee, with patterns emerging with regard to the number of statements and Individual Development Plans in relation to specific sectors, classes and schools. While incomers to the region who seek to access the provision is an issue which the Joint-Committee has previously looked at in terms of its impact and effect, the eligibility criteria for gaining additional support are now clearly stated and publicised thus making it easier for parents to make decisions based on fact.

- The Joint-Committee sought clarification of the status of the new Joint ALN Strategy relative to other authorities across Wales.

The Joint-Committee was informed that Officers from both counties have sought to impress on the Welsh Government that in the interests of consistency, fairness, and accountability all requirements and practices under the new ALN legislation should apply equally and uniformly across local authorities in Wales. The view is that allowing the 22 local authorities the autonomy to determine their own criteria would not be helpful, and that it would be preferable if a national set of criteria be issued as part of the legislation.

The Joint-Committee took the view that as a dedicated forum for additional learning needs it should lend its weight to the effort to bring pressure to bear on the Welsh Government to standardise ALN eligibility criteria across Wales and to this end it was agreed that Officers be requested to write to the Welsh Government on its behalf.

It was resolved to accept the report and to note its contents.

ACTIONS ENSUING:

- **Future reporting on SEN Provider Unit data to include information about the number of children who have an Individual Development Plan.**
- **Future reporting on SEN Provider Unit data to include information about the number of children affected by exceptions.**

- **That a letter be sent to Welsh Government on behalf of the Joint-Committee to request that a national set of eligibility criteria be issued as part of the implementation of the Additional Learning Needs Measure and the Education Tribunal (Wales).**

4 MANAGEMENT OF THE JOINT-COMMITTEE

The Senior Inclusion Manager of Gwynedd Council reported that due to the absence of the Administrative Services Manager, the SEN Joint-Committee since last September has been jointly managed on an informal basis by the Senior Inclusion Manager, Anglesey's ALN Officer and the Principal Educational Psychologist. The Joint-Committee's support is requested to put this arrangement on a formal footing in order to provide stability for the staff. To facilitate the arrangement it is intended to re-locate the office to the Gwynedd Education Department.

The Senior Education Accountant confirmed that the proposed arrangement would not entail additional cost to the Joint-Committee.

It was resolved to endorse the arrangement for the management of the Joint-Committee's Administrative Office as proposed.

NO FURTHER ACTION ENSUING

5 UPDATE ON THE JOINT- COMMITTEE'S FINANCIAL POSITION

The Senior Education Accountant confirmed that the indications are that the Joint-Committee financially will break even by the end of the year. However, the cost of scanning files for Cloud storage has amounted to £30k in excess of the budget and this will be charged to the authorities on the basis of £20k for Gwynedd and £10k for Anglesey over and above their contributions as was agreed in the event of any overspend occurring on the budget. However, there may be underspending elsewhere in the budget that will help reduce the amount of overspend.

The Senior Inclusion Manager said that moving to a digital file storage system makes accessing the information far easier and also means that the information is more easily retrievable and far more secure than it otherwise would have been had it remained on paper files in one location. Additionally, the relocation of the Administrative Office to Gwynedd Council's Education Department means that the space to host the volume of paperwork involved is not available.

It was resolved to note the information.

NO FURTHER ACTION ENSUING

6 UPDATE ON THE ALN AND INCLUSION STRATEGY

The Project Manager reported on the issues arising from the previous meeting of the Joint-Committee in September with regard to implementing the new Joint ALN and Inclusion Strategy as follows:

- That the Governance Model will be part of the formal agreement between the Joint-Committee and the Heads of Education of the two authorities. A memorandum of understanding which is a legal document is being drafted to accompany the changes taking place and the governance model will be reviewed.
- Discussions with schools and governing bodies are ongoing and they are being kept up to date on developments via the co-ordinators. Further work will be undertaken with Head Teachers and Governors.
- The transition to the new model will be facilitated by the Memorandum of Understanding.
- The production of an Annual Report on the services encompassed by the new ALN and Inclusion Strategy can be incorporated within the final formal agreement.
- Safeguarding Welsh medium training has been discussed and measures are planned by the Welsh Government to address this issue and to fund Welsh medium training courses for educational psychologist and specialist teachers.

- Provision for 16 to 25 year olds has been recognised in the new ALN and Inclusion Strategy as a second phase. Greater clarity from Welsh Government around who is financially responsible for the provision for this age group is awaited.
- Consultation on the restructuring process has been ongoing since 5 October and all affected staff members within the Joint-Committee and within the two authorities have been given an opportunity to present their views in one to one meetings with Personnel representatives. Additionally, every service has had an opportunity to discuss any concerns they may have and to give feedback on the proposed structure which is now being fine-tuned. A meeting for all staff members is to be held on 6 December, 2016 at which the Heads of Education of both Gwynedd and Anglesey Councils will present the final staffing structure.

The Joint-Committee noted the information and sought clarification of the implementation timeline and consequently, the schedule for the discontinuation of the Joint-Committee both as an entity and as a forum given that the Joint-Committee's next and possibly final meeting is scheduled for 17 March, 2017.

The Joint-Committee was informed that the Joint-Committee will cease to be the employer on 31 August, 2017; it is intended that the staff changes to be implemented as part of the Strategy will take effect on 1 September, 2017 at which point Gwynedd Council will become the employer as the lead authority for the Joint ALN and Inclusion Strategy. It is planned that the partnership agreement between the two authorities will be in place by the 31 March, 2017 and every effort will be made to formalise the governance arrangements by March, so that the governance model can be presented to the Joint-Committee at its March meeting. However, it is possible that a meeting(s) of the Joint-Committee will be required after March, 2017 in order to formally close the accounts before the end of September in accordance with statutory requirement.

It was resolved to accept and to note the information.

ACTION ENSUING: Officers to confirm the meetings requirements and the schedule for bringing the Joint-Committee to an end.

7 NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the next meeting of the Joint-Committee is to be held at 10:30 a.m. on Friday, 17 March, 2017 in Llangefni.

**Councillor Llinos Medi Huws
Chair**