

Education & Children Scrutiny Committee Task & Finish Group 2021/22

School Organisation Consultation Process

Thursday, 8th July, 2021
10:00am

INTERIM RECOMMENDATIONS REPORT

SUMMARY

The Education and Children Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 21st April 2021 agreed to establish a Task and Finish Group to review the current consultation process for school organisation changes.

The main aims of the review were agreed as follows:

1. Review the current process of engaging and consulting with schools, pupils, parents and the public in terms of any proposed school changes
2. Identify national and international best practice on consultation and engagement
3. Review the way in which the Council's Strategic Objectives is communicated, consulted upon and understood by schools, pupils, parents and residents eg WESP and MEP
4. To formulate recommendations for consideration by the Executive Board.

The Planning and Scoping Document includes the following:

- Context for the review
- Advisors / Support Officers
- Aims / scope of the review
- How it will contribute to achieving corporate/community objectives and well-being objectives
- Initial list of key stakeholders
- Information / documents required to inform the work of the study
- Timescale for completion of the review

At the first meeting of the Task and Finish Group held on 13th May, 2021 it was decided to split the review into 2 parts.

- (a) How the authority engages and consults in developing its strategic plans (WESP, MEP etc.), and

(b) How the authority engages and consults on specific school organisation proposals

The Group agreed to focus on point (a) initially as the Department was in the process of revising its WESP and MEP, with public consultation envisaged within the next year. The Group were therefore keen to feed into that process.

During the meeting held on the 17th June, 2021 members met with Welsh Government officials, namely; Bethan Webb, Deputy Director and Siwan Jones, Head of Welsh in Education Planning to consider the following:

- Welsh Government's expectation of Councils on consultation when developing Strategic Plans
- The requirements of the school organisation code in this regard, and any plans to amend the Act
- The proposed new school categorisation system for Wales

During the meeting held on 24th June, 2021 members met with further Welsh Government officials, namely: Neal O'Leary, Programme Director, 21st Century Schools & Colleges Programme, Jacqui Moyle, Head of School Organisation and Admissions and Rachel De Benedictis, School Reorganisation Manager, 21st Century Schools and Colleges Programme to consider the following:

- What are the expectations of WG of Councils when it comes to consulting with Schools, Staff and Communities on their Strategic Plans
- School Organisation Code – wider discussion on School Organisation Code and how Councils deal with particular proposals, i.e. schools closures, wesp etc.
- Use of funding within 21st Century Schools and ability to refurbish schools and open and close schools.

During the meeting of the 24th June, 2021 members were also presented with an outline by the Authority's Head of Curriculum & Wellbeing & Head of Access to Education on how officers intend to involve and consult different stakeholders as part of the development of the WESP and MEP over the next year.

During the meetings the members discussed a number of issues, which can be seen in the attached Action Notes. As a result of those discussions, and in line with the desire to feed into the process of consultation around those Strategic Plans, we propose the following interim recommendations:-

INTERIM RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the Education Department Officers continue to develop a clear Communication Plan for the revised MEP and WESP which as well as including elected members, schools and public also includes a variety of stakeholders such as the Youth Service, Mudiad Meithrin, Flying Start and School Councils, and that the process be refined as more information becomes available.

2. That a range of both on-line and in person techniques are employed where possible in consulting on the strategic plans.
3. That officers discuss any school organisation proposals which form part of the revised MEP with schools directly before any documentation is made public, and outline the nature of the proposal i.e. Investment Programme/ Rationalisation Programme.
4. That the Authority writes to the Welsh Government urging clarity as soon as possible with regards to the new school categorisation system.
5. That the Authority writes to the Welsh Government calling on them to ensure that the process of changing a school's language category falls within the WESP instead of the School Organisation Code, to reflect the fact that a school's journey along the continuum is a process and not an event.
6. That the Authority writes to the Welsh Government seeking information on how many small schools have benefited from 21st century funding, to determine whether evidence shows that the 5 case business model fails to deliver funding to small schools.