

Lancashire County Council

Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the Meeting held on Tuesday, 10th November, 2020 at 10.30 am in Skype Virtual Meeting - Skype

Present:

County Councillor Andrea Kay (Chair)

County Councillors

M Dad	J Mein
Mrs S Charles	E Nash
A Cheetham	J Potter
S Clarke	J Purcell
J Eaton BEM	M Salter
N Hennessy	P Steen

Co-opted members

Dr Sam Johnson, Representing CE Schools

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Disclosure of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

None were disclosed.

3. Minutes of the meeting held on 14 October 2020

Resolved: The minutes from the meeting held on 14 October 2020 were confirmed as an accurate record.

4. Education in Lancashire - Digital Challenges and Opportunities

The Chair welcomed the following Headteachers to the meeting; Charlotte Garner, Edenfield CE Primary School; Christopher Holmes, Privat Primary School; Ruth England, Shuttleworth College; and James Kerfoot, Accrington Academy; to the meeting. Also in attendance were Sarah Callaghan, Director of Education and Skills; and Audrey Swann, Headteacher for Vulnerable and Challenging Groups (LCC).

The report presented sought to provide members of the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Committee with information on the digital challenges and opportunities faced by schools in Lancashire as a result of the ongoing Covid-19 restrictions.

Each of the headteachers provided members with an overview of their experiences so far of virtual learning.

The committee was informed that Accrington Academy had reopened on 23 March 2020 working remotely from home. The speed at which the education profession had reacted was very quick. Engagement with learning was around 75%. For various reasons 25% of pupils did not engage with learning during the school closure. Some pupils were digitally challenged as they did not have laptops or internet connection. When the academy opened in September there were challenges around bubble collapses and teachers who were isolating at home. Staff shortages were also a problem. Laptops had been purchased for vulnerable pupils.

Edenfield CE Primary School's pupils had easier access to technology although there had been some issues with learning engagement and supporting families. It had been vital to reduce gaps in learning quickly. Google Classroom had been used in terms of online learning. This had been a new learning process for teachers and the normal curriculum had been delivered to pupils. Credit was given to the families who had supported their children with their learning. Gaps in education had been minimised through March and April. The school had been impacted by bubble closures in September and live teaching was key. There had been positive feedback from parents and the school had not seen any significant gaps in learning.

Privat Primary School had problems with laptops at the beginning of lockdown as many of the pupils did not have access to them. The school had put bids in for laptops through the Department for Education (DfE). Some pupils did not have English as a first language. The school made sure it could communicate with families all the time and sent learning packs with resources to the families every fortnight. There were different packs for SEN and ESL (English as Second Language) children. Emails were set up for all staff so parents could contact them. There were family support workers who would contact the vulnerable children every day and they would also conduct home visits where necessary. Any vulnerable child was encouraged to come into school. Communication with parents was key.

The issue in the beginning of lockdown for Shuttleworth College was supporting those students who received free school meals. The school ensured free school meal vouchers were issued to its vulnerable children. Resources were delivered to the homes of vulnerable children as well and 150 reconditioned laptops were purchased from a local IT provider in early lockdown. Along with the laptops the school already had, around 250 additional laptops were distributed to vulnerable children. The school had also provided training for students on the new technology. Staff could Zoom into meetings and pupils could attend lessons virtually. It was noted that there were different levels of engagement with different students and attendance had been impacted

Comments and questions raised by the committee were as follows:

- The committee enquired as to what could be done to ease the pressures on teaching staff at Accrington Academy particularly around Covid

administration. The headteacher and his PA were doing the administration themselves to allow teachers to carry on with delivering lessons. It was noted that Headteachers had been instructed it was up to their own discretion on how to deal with Covid cases in schools. Yet Headteachers and teachers had not trained in public health matters and felt they were making very challenging decisions on what they thought was best in responding to Covid cases in school. Good communication with parents, keeping anxiety levels down and making sure the children were continually learning was key. United Learning (Academy Trust sponsor) had been supportive in providing advice to the Academy. Virtual training had been developed in conjunction with Curious Minds for staff around wellbeing, called The Uncertainty Principle. The project had been shortlisted for a national teaching accolade.

- On whether the attendance rates of BAME pupils had been affected by the pandemic, the committee was informed that for Accrington Academy approximately 60% of cases identified were Asian heritage females. There appeared to be evidence that these pupils had been identified as a more vulnerable group in the area. Generally engagement from parents had been good throughout the pandemic. It was however felt that there was slightly more anxiety from parents with Asian heritage girls and were more likely to keep their children off school. Overall the academy's attendance was in line with national figures and for this year was currently at around 94%.
- It was noted that a considerable number of requests had been received from schools seeking advice on interpreting Public Health guidance. The county council had commissioned an additional six officers to help maintain the phone line and email communications. A schools' bulletin was also published on a regular basis and this was used to advise schools on the updated guidance from Public Health.
- There were concerns about the stress levels teachers were feeling. The committee was informed that the Ofsted handbook addressed issues around workload and wellbeing. Some schools had put out a wellbeing charter for their staff. It was noted that breakfast clubs were an essential requirement for key workers and their children. One of the main barriers for some children accessing online lessons was their parents having to work during the school day.
- On lessons learned during the pandemic it was noted that whilst longstanding issues of poor devices and internet connections were being addressed, the cost of broadband remained a barrier for some children with a number of parents choosing to use pay as you go services on mobile devices instead. A finite number of routers had been made available from the Department of Education.
It was felt there was the potential to make some considerable changes to the way teaching is delivered as a result of the pandemic. It was also felt that Governing Body meetings could continue in a virtual format.
- There was a Lancashire Digital Skills Partnership Group which was reviewing opportunities for families and communities to access the internet, providing training for people to use technology as well as approaching businesses throughout the county to ask for donations of devices.

- Concerns were expressed in relation to those pupils who would take their 'A' Level and GCSE exams in 2021.

Resolved: That;

- i. The continuing digital opportunities and challenges faced by schools across Lancashire be recognised.
- ii. The work undertaken by the county council to further support schools be noted.

5. Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme 2020/21

The report presented provided information on the single combined work programme drafted for all of the Lancashire County Council scrutiny committees.

It was noted that the December meeting of the committee would focus on mental health in children and young people including an update on Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services in Lancashire (CAMHS).

There was a request to review the viability of moving away from GCSE exams and SATs in 2021 for secondary and primary school pupils at the next scheduled meeting of the committee.

Resolved: That the work plan presented be noted.

6. Urgent Business

There were no items of Urgent Business.

7. Date of Next Meeting

The committee was informed that a 'Go Fund Me' page had been set up on the Intranet for children in care and care leavers. Donations from staff and elected members would be shared out to all care leavers across Lancashire in the way of a voucher or a gift.

The next virtual meeting of the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Committee would take place on Wednesday 16 December 2020 at 10.30am.

L Sales
Director of Corporate Services

County Hall
Preston