

MINUTE
of
EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Minute of virtual meeting held at 10.00am on 11 November 2021.

Present:

Councillor Alan Lafferty (Chair)
Councillor Caroline Bamforth
Provost Jim Fletcher
Councillor Charlie Gilbert
Councillor Jim McLean

Councillor Colm Merrick (Vice Chair)
Councillor Gordon Wallace
Dr Frank Angell
Mrs Mary McIntyre
Mr Des Morris

Councillor Lafferty in the Chair

Attending:

Mark Ratter, Director of Education; Janice Collins, Head of Education Services (Quality Improvement); Joe McCaig, Head of Education Services (Performance and Provision); Siobhan McColgan, Head of Education Services (Equality and Equity); Tracy Morton, Education Senior Manager (Developing People); Graeme Hay, Education Senior Manager (Leading Business Change); Leanne Knox, Business Support Supervisor; Colin Hutton, Senior Communications Officer; John Burke, Committee Services Officer; and Liona Allison, Assistant Committee Services Officer.

Apologies:

Councillor Tony Buchanan (Leader) and Ms Dorothy Graham.

CHAIR'S OPENING REMARKS

1802. Councillor Lafferty informed the committee that should the meeting run to 11am, a minute's silence would be observed to commemorate Armistice Day.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

1803. There were no declarations of interest intimated.

EDUCATION REFORM CONSULTATION

1804. The committee considered a report by the Director of Education on the proposed approach and timescales for responding to the Scottish Government's Education Reform Consultation.

The Director of Education noted that the OECD had published two reports on Scottish Education. *Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future* was published in June 2021 and gave an update on the impact of Curriculum for Excellence on quality and equity in Scottish schools and highlighted areas for change and development. The Scottish Government had accepted the recommendations of the report and decided that the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) would be replaced and the functions of Education Scotland would be reviewed with the removal of inspections from its remit.

Subsequently, *Upper-Secondary Education Student Assessment in Scotland: A Comparative Perspective* was published in August 2021 and outlined improvements that could be made to align the curriculum and assessment in the senior phase of education.

Professor Ken Muir had been tasked with taking forward the reform of SQA and Education Scotland and, as part of that work, a consultation had been designed to seek the views of stakeholders in helping to shape the future of Scotland's national education agencies. The consultation had been published on 30 September 2021 and responses were due by 26 November 2021.

A number of forums were being organised with stakeholders within East Renfrewshire in order to gather views ahead of the official response to the consultation, with details of the stakeholder groups being listed. Additionally, as the next meeting of the committee was not until after the consultation's end date, it was proposed that a short-term working group be established to consider the responses gained from those stakeholders and finalise the Council's response. Thereafter, the response would be submitted to the next meeting of the committee for homologation.

Councillor Wallace asked how the Council could have input on how the SQA and Education Scotland would be organised when it wasn't clear what they would be set up to do, and if this would mean that the working group would have to make a number of assumptions in making recommendations. The Director of Education acknowledged this to be the case and it was a challenge to look at the role of any new organisation without looking at the recommendations within the OECD report. An implementation plan was being published by the Scottish Government, but it could have been beneficial to look at the vision more widely before agreeing to any changes to those organisations.

Provost Fletcher stated that this consultation was very important for East Renfrewshire given the strong emphasis placed on education within the area and the importance of education to both residents and those looking to move into East Renfrewshire. He noted that the OECD reports had been delayed until after the election and the recommendations suggested that Curriculum for Excellence hadn't worked as intended. He remarked that the SQA being replaced felt politically motivated following the exam results problems that had occurred in 2020. He expressed hope that the response to the consultation would be robust and not shy away from confronting the issues necessary.

Thereafter the committee agreed:-

- (a) to note the report;
- (b) to note that changes to Scotland's national education agencies would likely have significant implications for education in East Renfrewshire;
- (c) to approve the establishment of a short life working group comprising of Councillors Lafferty, Buchanan and Wallace to agree the East Renfrewshire response to the consultation; and

- (d) that the final consultation submission be presented to the committee for homologation at its meeting of 3 February 2022.

SQA RESULTS 2020-2021

1805. Councillor Lafferty invited the Head of Education Services (Performance and Provision) to give a presentation on the results achieved by pupils attending schools in East Renfrewshire for the 2020-2021 school year.

The Head of Education Services (Performance and Provision) indicated that the results presented would also include information from primary establishments as well as senior phase data relating to SQA awards.

As had been expected, the 2020-2021 school year had proved challenging for pupils and education staff, with the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic still being felt throughout the year. Unsurprisingly, the greatest impact of the pandemic had been on those within targeted equity groups and in the most deprived areas of East Renfrewshire.

There had been a decrease in the proportion of children attaining expected levels of achievement in the Broad General Education standards, although there were still high levels of attainment. 90.3% of Primary 1, 4 and 7 pupils were achieving expected levels or better of reading, 87.4% for writing, 94.1% in talking and listening, 86.2 in literacy (children attaining expected levels in all three literacy areas of reading, writing and talking & listening) and 89.9% in maths. It was highlighted that while the figures had decreased slightly on those recorded in 2018-2019, they were still up on the baseline figures from 2015-2016. However, it was highlighted that the largest impact had been recorded among children resident in SIMD 1 and 2 areas with 6% decrease in reading achievement as compared to the overall figure of a 1% decrease, from 2018-19 (last year recorded) to 2020-21. Similarly, SIMD 1 and 2 children achieving the expected level in numeracy had decreased by 5% since 2018-19, as opposed to the overall decrease of 1%.

It was noted that in the 2020-21 academic year an alternative certification model was once again employed as a consequence of COVID-19, and that this was the third different assessment model used in each of the last three years (2018-19 through 2020-21); the last traditional diet of examinations having taken place in 2018-19. In S4, the number of pupils achieving 5 or more awards at SQA level 5 or better was 79%, down from 81% in 2020, but higher than the 78% achieved in 2019. The figure was also significantly higher than the "virtual comparator" figure of 59%, which is a comparator average based on a national sample of 10 times the number of S4 pupils, with similar characteristics to the S4 pupils in East Renfrewshire. A breakdown of those figures by school was also provided to the committee.

In S5, the number of pupils achieving 5 or more awards at SQA Level 6 or better was consistent at 50%, the same as the previous year and up from 44% in 2019. Again, it was significantly higher than the virtual comparator figure of 29%. S6 also showed excellent achievement, with 65% achieving 5 or more SQA Level 6 or better awards, up from 61% in 2020 and 58% in 2019. The virtual comparator figure for this measure was 46%, which was comfortably exceeded, showing strong performance against the expected average across the board.

More information was given on the quality of awards achieved, with the figures for National 5 mathematics showing that 81% of children in East Renfrewshire had been presented for examination at that level, far higher than the national average of 44%. Furthermore, 92% of pupils presented had achieved an A-C grade, which was consistent with attainment in 2018-19 and 2019-20; this was significantly higher than national performance where 80% of those S4 pupils presented attained National 5 mathematics.

Overall at S4, 92.7% of pupils submitted for awards at National 5 achieved A-C grades. This was down from the 96% achieved in 2020, but up from the 90.5% achieved in 2019. Additionally, the numbers of pupils achieving 8 National 5 awards at A grade and A-C grade had increased steadily since 2007 and the trend of improvement was continuing. S5 pupils achieving 5 Highers and 5 A grades at Higher had also increased steadily over the same period.

Information was provided on interventions that took place with selected pupils relating to study and assessment skills. S4 pupils in the lowest performing 20% were targeted with the aim of increasing their attainment. A number of case studies showed the impact of this intervention, with pupils significantly outperforming their expected achievement.

Information was then provided on attainment refined by groups of learners on the basis of SIMD groups as a measure of affluence. Those in the most deprived areas were consistently performing lower than their peers in less deprived areas. On average, there was a 51 point increase per child with each SIMD group from 1 to 10. However, it was noted that in East Renfrewshire, even those children in SIMD 1 to 3 areas had achieved on average 207 insight points more than the national average, the equivalent of a Higher A award more per child. It was noted that the department's ambition was for all children to attain highly and equally despite differing characteristics relating to affluence, with the objective of eradicating the poverty related attainment gap.

Finally, information was provided on vocational qualifications and leaver outcomes. 15.8% of leavers in 2019/2020 (latest data available at this time) had gained 1 or more vocational qualifications at SCQF Level 6 or better, making East Renfrewshire the highest performing local authority in this regard, and far outperforming the national average of 8.4%. It was also recorded that 96.2% of school leavers were in positive destinations, down on 97.5% from the previous year, but higher than the virtual comparator figure of 95.6%. East Renfrewshire was the highest ranking local authority in relation to the proportion of children in education, training or employment as measured by the national Participation Measure in August 2021. It was noted that there had been an increase in the proportion of 16 to 19 year olds in education, employment and training in East Renfrewshire over the three year period.

Provost Fletcher congratulated the pupils and staff on an excellent set of results, considering the significant challenges faced due to the pandemic. He noted the huge dedication and hard work by all in making those achievements possible. He did question the fact that pass rates at Higher appeared to have doubled since 2007. The Head of Education Services (Performance and Provision) indicated that these figures were over a significant period of time and increases were only in line with the national average over the past 3 years rather than more broadly since that period. The information provided showed that East Renfrewshire Council's performance was atypical in terms of their increase in attainment when looking at virtual comparators, often significantly above the expectation level. He added that the significant programme of moderation of assessments gave confidence that evaluations provided by teacher assessment were robust and accurate in terms of pupil ability and performance.

Councillor Wallace said that it was remarkable that the pupils and staff in East Renfrewshire had produced such results given what they had been through over the pandemic. He added that it was important that comparison be made globally as children were entering a global marketplace and would be competing with children from around the world. He remarked on political pressure being brought to bear on awarding bodies to paint a picture of success regardless of the true situation. While he stressed that his comments were no reflection on the hard work and efforts of children and staff over the period, he stated that any suggestion that attainment locally or nationally had increased was in his view absurd. If this were the case, the suggestion should surely be that all education going forward take place in the same manner as it had over the pandemic. He referred to the review of the SQA and Education Scotland and said that he looked forward to preparing a solid, robust response.

Councillor Merrick echoed the remarks of the previous speakers in terms of the effort and dedication of pupils and staff. He stated that this was a time that everyone would remember and there may never be another term like it. The Council had done its best to mitigate the impact on children and young people. He particularly thanked the Head of Education Services (Performance and Provision) for the case studies which helped to cut through the broader figures and show the impact of interventions like the study and assessment skills courses outlined. He summarised his comments by saying that it was a far better year than it would have been if not for the efforts of those in the Education Department.

Referring to Councillor Wallace's comments, Councillor Bamforth stated that she felt that it was disingenuous to insinuate that grades were being artificially inflated for political reasons. She stated that children in East Renfrewshire were very capable of competing with compatriots from the rest of the UK and worldwide, and she felt that education in East Renfrewshire was more than adequate to compete. She concluded by adding her thanks to all involved in achieving the results outlined.

Mrs McIntyre offered assurances that children in East Renfrewshire schools were not facing "dumbed down" levels of work. She cited examples of parents who were surprised at the difficulty of work children were bringing home compared to their own personal memories of school.

The Director of Education acknowledged the comments of all those present. He stated that he would take the opportunity after the meeting to write to staff and pass on the thanks of the committee for their outstanding work. The comments reflected the professionalism of staff throughout the past year and he paid tribute to them. He noted the lengths that teachers had gone to during the pandemic to not only educate but also to engage children and care for them, and that focus on wellbeing was key.

Thereafter, the committee agreed to note the presentation.

CHAIR

