



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

CABINET

25TH MARCH 2021

A PROPOSAL TO DELIVER SHARED REGIONAL EDUCATION ADVISORY SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH A SENSORY IMPAIRMENT

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION AND INCLUSION SERVICES WITH THE CABINET MEMBER FOR EDUCATION AND INCLUSION

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is for Members to consider a proposal for Rhondda Cynon Taf's Sensory Team within the Access and Inclusion Service to move from a separate and autonomous sensory service to a shared sub-regional, educational advisory service for children and young people with a sensory impairment¹

It is proposed that this new sub-regional service would be developed in partnership with the two other Councils from the Cwm Taf Morgannwg region; Bridgend and Merthyr County Borough Council for at least the next three years.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Cabinet:

- 2.1 Note the contents of this report.
- 2.2 Agree to support the proposal developed in partnership with the Education Directors from Rhondda Cynon Taf, Bridgend and Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Councils in the Cwm Taf Morgannwg area, to deliver sub-regional, shared educational advisory services for children and young people with a sensory impairment, for at least the next three years.

¹ Children and young people who have a hearing (deaf), visual (blind) and/or dual sensory impairment (deafblind)

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 To seek support for the collaborative cross Council proposal for a shared, sub-regional educational advisory service for children and young people with a sensory impairment. This is required to
- Provide a resilient and future-proofed sensory impairment service to families and schools across the region, which can respond effectively as the numbers of children and young people with sensory impairments increases, appreciably.
 - Address the unequivocal nationally collated evidence of rising challenge on the current capacity of Councils to meet this group of young people's additional learning needs (ALN).
 - Diminish the growing difficulties of recruiting and retaining specially skilled staff to provide these statutory services, locally.
 - Ensure that all partner local authorities are prepared and able to meet the additional challenges inherent in the forthcoming ALN reforms and the implementation of the Additional Learning Needs Educational Tribunal Act (2018).

4. BACKGROUND

- 4.1 Across the Central South Consortium, and Wales as a whole, Councils currently provide and deliver highly specialist sensory impairment and ALN services to families and schools. This report acknowledges the growing difficulties in delivering a continuous service to families, during a period of unprecedented public sector financial austerity, the significant impact of a global pandemic together with an irrefutable increase in the population of these extremely vulnerable children and young people.

In the autumn of 2020, Directors of Education in the Central South Consortium commissioned an independent review of the region's sensory impairment and ALN services. The purpose of this assignment was to ascertain if an individual Council's current sensory impairment services were fit for future-purpose, financially sustainable and operationally prepared to meet the prospective workforce changes, projected over the next five years.

- 4.2 A specialist independent consultant, with over forty years' experience in this particularly specialist ALN field, was appointed to undertake an options appraisal. His report was presented to the Directors of Education within the Central South Consortium in October 2020. A copy of this report is provided in Appendix 1.
- 4.3 The Central South Consortium Education Directors' group reviewed the independent report and considered that it is in the best interests of families with hearing impaired/deaf, visually impaired/blind and/or deafblind/multi-sensory impaired children to move forward with an pioneering strategy to future-proof these specialist services by developing a sub-regional sensory

impairment service across Rhondda Cynon Taf, Bridgend and Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Councils.

5. THE NEXT STEPS

If the three Council Cabinets endorse this proposal i.e. delivery of a regional, shared educational advisory service for sensory impairment, the Directors of Education will subsequently present to their respective Cabinets the following:

- An explicit and clear-cut strategy to ensure that families, across the three Councils, continue to receive high quality, specialist statutory support for their children and young people;
- Projected increases in the numbers of children and young people together with a plan on how Councils will continue to meet their statutory duties i.e. provide mandatory qualified ALN staff to support families and schools, across the Cwm Taf Morgannwg region
- A remodeling of the existing educational sensory services in particular the operational arrangements and deployment of resources, advised and informed by an Independent Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Consultant;
- Three-year budget proposals for consideration by the respective Councils;
- Ensure all modified operational arrangements take account of forthcoming legislative changes associated with the Additional Learning Needs and Educational Tribunal Act (2018) which is due for implementation in 2021 and requires the delivery of future proofed services for 0 - 25 year olds.

6. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 A robust Equality Impact Assessment will be undertaken as part of the essential consultation in regard to these proposals.

7. CONSULTATION

- 7.1 There will be significant engagement with all families across the region, Councils' current sensory impairment staff/teams, headteachers, governors and members of the area's voluntary and community sector, as part of the transformation of the current, individual sensory impairment services. This will safeguard the respective future delivery of support and interventions to sensory impaired children and young people across Rhondda Cynon Taf, Bridgend and Merthyr Tydfil Councils.

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

- 8.1 The current costs associated with the Sensory Service in the Access and Inclusion Service, which sits within the Education and Inclusion Service Directorate, equates to £742k.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Each Council has a legal duty, under the current Welsh Code of Practice (ALN) to provide specialist services to families of deaf/hearing impaired, blind/visually impaired and deafblind/multi-sensory impaired children, in early years and school settings (*currently not in FE provision*). Under impending, new legislation, these duties and responsibilities will change to include liability for those young people attending local post-16 FE establishments.
- 9.2 In addition, Councils are also required to provide specialist teachers who hold a mandatory qualification in; hearing, visual or multi-sensory impairment. Without the provision of an appropriately qualified workforce, families would be entitled to seek specialist, out-of-authority placements to secure access to this specialist teaching and learning, thus placing an excessive and avoidable burden on the Council's ALN budgets.

10. LINKS TO THE CORPORATE AND NATIONAL PRIORITIES AND THE WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT

- 10.1 This report seeks to ratify a proposal, by the Directors of Education from each of the three Councils, to collaborate and deliver a regional, shared educational advisory sensory impairment service. The decision will meet national and local priorities for regional collaboration and regionalisation and comply with the five ways of working set out in the Well-being of Future Generations Act.

11. CONCLUSIONS

- 11.1 The Independent Consultant's report provides robust and direct evidence that the population of deaf/hearing impaired, blind/visually impaired and deafblind/multi-sensory impaired children is increasing across the region and Wales. All three local authorities involved with this proposal reported increases in their respective hearing, visual and multi-sensory impaired populations over the last five years.
- 11.2 Furthermore, the recruitment and retention of specialist teachers and support staff, holding mandatory qualifications in hearing, visual and multi-sensory impairment, has become progressively more challenging over the last five years.

In a number of cases it has not been possible to recruit *any* qualified staff to current sensory teams and Councils have embarked on the costly exercise of finding and training experienced mainstream teachers in this area of ALN.

Interest from experienced, mainstream or special school teachers willing to undertake re-training and complete a two-year mandatory teacher training course is unpromisingly low.

- 11.3 Specialist sensory impairment workforces are recognised nationally, as ageing. The current, small number of academic training providers (*none in Wales*) cannot deliver sufficient numbers of newly qualified teachers, as the contemporary workforce retirees exceeds the demand for new appointments.

Within five years (or less) without decisive action, the Council's current isolated sensory impairment teams will be faced with operationally *critical*, short-falls in qualified staff, to meet growing numbers of newly identified and vulnerable children and young people with sensory impairments.

- 11.4 This opportunity will enable us to drive forward and improve the way in which current sensory impairment services operate. Regionalising the resources and expertise across the three Councils will enable us to realise efficiencies in travel, equipment, training and direct support to families and schools. However, the main driver for this proposal is to provide resilience in the system to meet a growing area of ALN.
- 11.5 The respective Directors of Education have been proactive, having commissioned an independent review to evaluate the risks and consequent options facing the region's sensory services. The report identifies areas for development and improvement. If this proposal is approved, it will ensure the partner Councils future-proof these highly regarded ALN services, safeguarding and ensuring financial sustainability.
- 11.6 In a number of the region's local authorities, there has been growing uncertainty regarding the long-term future of their mandatory ALN services due to the significant challenges in recruiting and retaining staff.

This report seeks to provide a clear commitment from each of the three respective Councils to the enduring future of these low incidence services, and provide families, schools and local authority staff with assurance, during a period of significant insecurity, for this aspect of the educational sector in Wales.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

AS AMENDED BY

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

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Other Information:-

Relevant Scrutiny Committee-

Background Papers-

Appendix 1.

**Strategic Position Paper ~ an Options Appraisal of the Region's Sensory
Impairment Services, October 2020**

Mark Geraghty, Independent SEND Consultant