

BRIDGEND COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

EDUCATION, LEISURE AND COMMUNITY SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

RESPONSE TO NATIONAL ASSEMBLY FOR WALES – CALL FOR EVIDENCE

IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS ON SCHOOL FUNDING

At a recent meeting of the Education, Leisure and Community Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Members discussed the Call for Evidence from the National Assembly for Wales in relation to school funding. This Committee is made up of Bridgend County Borough Councillors, Registered Representatives from schools in the borough and Co-opted Members from the following organisations:

- National Association of Headteachers
- National Union of Headteachers
- Association of Teachers and Lecturers
- National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers

The following points summarise their discussion in relation to the recommendations of the Committee on School Funding on arrangements for school funding in Wales.

- As an overall observation, Members felt that the school funding process is difficult to understand. Members acknowledged that the funding process is, by its very nature, technical, but feel that the information surrounding the process could be revised to provide a clear statement, ensuring that it is transparent and accessible to not only officers who deal with aspects of the process on a day-to-day basis, but also to School Teachers, Governors, Councillors and members of the public.
- The Committee highlighted the lack of transparency surrounding the rationale behind the school funding formula, commenting that it would be more effective and beneficial if it was understood why schools had been allocated a certain amount and thus assist schools in understanding what is expected of them.
- In relation to the school funding formula, Members also commented that it would enhance the understanding of all stakeholders, if the formula was explained in simpler terms with the use of diagrams and charts, with the view that more simplistic information can be more effective.
- Members agreed that the historic background to school funding required greater clarification and transparency in order to understand the current

situation in which each authority and school finds itself, in comparison to others.

- In relation to comparative information, the Committee highlighted the lack of clarity and consistency in financial reporting. The example of comparing funding per head for schools was given, where members felt that comparisons are misleading due to the fact that the formula accounts for additional factors such as deprivation and sparsity. Again, comments were made that if the factors behind the formula were clearer and more easily understood, more accurate and reliable comparisons could be made.
- The Committee commented on the lack of information available to them relating to the Standard Spending Assessment. Members highlighted that there was a gap in their understanding of what the Standard Spending Assessment is, how it is arrived at and what areas it covers. A clear, accessible explanation of this would be useful not just for the different tiers of government, but also for Local Government officers, to enhance their knowledge on the subject.
- Part of the role of governors, local authorities and Councillors is to challenge, particularly from a Scrutiny Committee perspective, and in order to do this, the subject which is to be challenged must be understood. The Committee stressed that as school funding underpins many of the subjects and issues raised under the Overview and Scrutiny role, it was essential for them to be able to access clear, understandable information relating to the process in order that they can carry out their role to the best standard. This is particularly important in relation to the annual consultation of the authority's budget, whereby the Committee and other groups such as the School Budget Forum require expertise in this particular area in order to challenge and respond with effective and informed recommendations.
- As an overall observation in relation to the recommendations of the National Assembly for Wales Committee on School Funding, the Committee expressed broad support of them all, with particular emphasis placed on the following recommendations:

1. We recommend that the Assembly Government should investigate the reason for differences in funding between the key stages, in particular for Year 6 and Year 7 pupils and report to the ELLS committee.

3. The Committee fully supports the Wales Audit Office recommendation⁴ to the Assembly Government that there should be a review of whether eligibility for free school meals represents the best indicator of deprivation and recommends that it be implemented as soon as possible

5. We recommend that the Assembly Government should immediately set

in train a review of the local government distribution formula so that the education element is based on the current and future costs of providing education services rather than on historic costs

11. Irrespective of any other changes, we recommend that the Government should work closely with local government to improve schools' understanding of the funding process and funding streams.

13. We recommend that the Assembly Government should publish, at the lowest level of disaggregation possible, meaningful comparisons of education spending in Wales, the other nations and regions of the UK and internationally and that it should work with other parts of Government to increase the level of detail available

15. We recommend that the Assembly Government should establish and publish minimum common basic funding requirements for school staffing, accommodation and equipment and that this information should be used to benchmark and inform decision-making at national and local levels on school funding. The Assembly Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning should report regularly to the ELL committee on progress towards establishing a minimum common basis funding requirement for schools.

16. We recommend that the Assembly Government should require authorities to report annually on any difference between the funding they allocate to schools and the minimum common basic funding requirement published by the Assembly Government.

19. We recommend that the Assembly Government should avoid initiating unsustainable policy actions through short-term specific grant programmes and should aim to provide longer-term funding (in alignment with the three-year budgeting proposals) to allow better financial planning by schools

The Committee would like to express their thanks to the National Assembly for Wales Enterprise and Learning Committee for providing them with this opportunity to pass on their views on such a key matter and would welcome any future opportunities for consultation.