

EDUCATION OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 25 November 2021 at 6.00 pm

In the Council Chamber at the Council House, Walsall

Committee Members present: Councillor L. Jeavons (Chair)
Councillor K. Murphy (Vice-Chair)
Councillor R. Burley
Councillor S. Ditta
Councillor S. Elson
Councillor K. Ferguson
Councillor N. Gandham (Substitute for Councillor S. Johal)
Councillor P. Kaur
Councillor E. Lee
Councillor L. Rattigan

Portfolio Holders present: Councillor C. Towe – Education & Skills

Non-elected non-voting Members present: Ms S. Guy – Primary Teacher Representative
Ms W. Duffus – Secondary Teacher Representative

Officers present: Mrs S. Rowe, Executive Director – Children’s Services
Mrs S. Kelly, Director – Access & Inclusion
Mr R. Thomas, Head of Access
Ms T. Collier, Lead Accountant
Dr P. Fantom, Democratic Services Officer

49/21 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors S. Johal and S. Nasreen.

The Chair informed Members that Councillor Nasreen had suffered a bereavement and the Committee’s condolences were conveyed to Councillor Nasreen on her loss.

50/21 Substitutions

Councillor N. Gandham substituted for Councillor S. Johal.

51/21 Declarations of interest and party whip

There were no declarations of interest or party whip for the duration of the meeting.

52/21 Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)

There were no agenda items requiring the exclusion of the public.

53/21 Minutes

A copy of the Minutes of the meeting held on 14 October 2021 was submitted [Annexed].

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 14 October 2021, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved and signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record.

54/21 Draft Revenue Budget and Draft Capital Programme 2022/23 – 2025/26

The Committee received a report on the draft revenue budget, which included the medium term financial outlook for the period 2022/23 to 2025/26 [Annexed].

The Portfolio Holder, Councillor C. Towe, introduced the report, noting that it outlined the draft revenue budget and the draft capital programme, and including detail around the PROUD draft revenue savings proposal and the investment and cost pressures that fell within the remit of the Committee. The Committee's feedback would be reported to the Cabinet on 15 December 2021, to inform the final draft budget to be considered by the Cabinet on 9 February 2022 and the recommendation to the Council on 24 February 2022.

The Lead Accountant, Ms T. Collier, reported that the PROUD service transformation plans had identified a number of savings relating to the Committee. In relation to operational proposals, i.e. savings that officers had delegations to implement, Appendix 1B of the report indicated that total savings of £682k could be made over two years. It was shown in Appendix 2 of the report that between 2022/23 and 2025/26, the total growth and investment relating to the remit of the Committee was £5.57m. Appendices 3 and 4 set out the draft capital programmes for Council funded schemes and external funded schemes respectively.

Having regard to Appendices 1 and 2 it was noted by the Director of Access & Inclusion, Mrs S. Kelly, that with regard to home to school transport there was investment necessary due to increased demand. The savings of £216k were being achieved due to the use of software enabling efficiencies and route optimisation. Investment in SEN support services was needed to reduce the reliance on agency staff due to staff turnover and to bring down caseloads. The streamlining of specialist services had been achieved through the introduction of new ways of working so that the non-staff operating costs could be reduced during the pandemic. There had been no impact on front line delivery, however.

Further to questions from Councillor Elson concerning the use of agency and temporary staff, and increased traded services to schools, Mrs Kelly stated that the increase in investment for staffing would lead to a reduction in EHCP caseloads. She emphasised that schools should purchase traded services from suppliers able to deliver a good services and that three-year programmes were being devised to enable schools to purchase services from the Local Authority.

These points were reiterated by Councillor Towe, who, in response to a question from Councillor Burley on service delivery, noted that whilst there were occasions when reliance on interim and agency staff was necessary, the preference was to have roles filled by permanent members of staff. Mrs Kelly stressed the commitment to ensure that a substantive team was in place to operate using a planned approach that would not destabilise delivery of the service. In reply to related questions from Members, she highlighted the various formal and informal processes, training programmes and continuous professional development opportunities available to enable the retention of existing skilled members of staff.

In response from an enquiry from Councillor Gandham about the maintenance of building, and whether this had been brought in-house, an explanation was given by the Head of Access, Mr R. Thomas, who related that in the design and build of the capital programme the Solihull framework for contractor procurement processes was still used. However, it was the Ambition of the Local Authority to make use of the new corporate landlord arrangements to develop frameworks for the Walsall area or use the national frameworks available through industry, such as the DfE national framework for design and consultancy services.

A question was asked by Councillor Gandham concerning the predicted forecast for the number of Walsall schools becoming academies and the affect this could have on the budgetary focus of the Local Authority. In response, Mrs Kelly explained the academisation processes and the manner in which all of Walsall's schools were supported by the Local Authority. Councillor Towe also reminded the Committee of the reduction in the number of academies rated as good or outstanding by Ofsted and that where there were concerns about the performance of academies, these had to be raised with the Regional Schools Commissioner.

Resolved:

1. That it be noted that the draft revenue budget proposals relating to the remit of the Committee as shown in Appendices 1 and 2 would be formally reported to the Cabinet on 15 December 2021;
2. That it be noted that the draft capital schemes included in the draft capital programme relating to the remit of the Committee as shown in Appendices 3 and 4 would be formally reported to the Cabinet on 15 December 2021.

55/21 Corporate Financial Performance – Quarter 2 Financial Monitoring Position for 2021/22

A report was submitted detailing the budget monitoring position for period 5 2021/22 and the revenue and capital forecast for the financial year-end 2021/22 for services under the remit of the Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee [Annexed].

Councillor Towe introduced the report, noting that it also detailed the risks that could have an impact on the forecast position and provided an update on the 2021/22 PROUD programme benefits.

The Lead Accountant, Ms T. Collier, reported that for services under the remit of the Committee, the forecast revenue position was net nil at period 5, and after net use of reserves was £1.47m. With reference to table 1, she noted that small overspends had incurred during the year, which were offset by reserves. There were additional costs due to the Covid-19 pandemic and, in terms of the risks for services under the remit of the Committee, the total risks of £413k were not included in the forecast but were set out in tables 4 and 5. Table 6 contained the services transformation plan benefits, and it was noted that the majority of benefits for this financial year had been achieved. Table 7 summarised the total capital programme of £41.2m, with the projected forecast spend for 2021/22 at Quarter 2 end being £20.96m with a proposed carry forward of £20.25m.

Further to a question from the Chair on the proposed carry forward, Mrs Kelly noted that this was a planned capital programme covering a number of years, and that the capital programme had remained on budget for all capital projects during the last financial year. Mr Thomas pointed out that at the last meeting there was discussion of the rising demand for specialist place provision in special schools and some mainstream schools, with the funding being subject to a report to the Cabinet seeking approval to provide additional places for vulnerable pupils.

Councillor Kaur having emphasised the risk that the demand for assessment continues to increase above capacity of the current educational psychology team, therefore incurring additional agency cost, Mrs Kelly stated that increases to the educational psychology and SEND administration team had already been included in the budget. This was in accordance with modelling of the growth of EHCPs over the next 5-10 years, with allowance for trends, thereby enabling identification of the size of team required.

Resolved:

That the revenue and capital forecast for the financial year-end 2021/22 for the services under the remit of the Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee be noted.

56/21 School Admissions Update

Councillor Towe introduced the report [annexed], noting the role of the Local Authority in relation to the admission to schools in Walsall for the primary, secondary, and infant and junior transfer rounds, together with applications for mid-year applications. The report provided statistical information on the number of applications received during 2021 and the timeline for admissions in 2022.

Mr Thomas outlined the responsibilities of the admission authority having regard to the Schools Admissions Code, with the Local Authority being the admission authority for a number of community and voluntary controlled schools in the Borough; however, it was not the admission authority for academies or voluntary aided schools as these are their own admissions authorities. He also explained the operation of the admission rounds, mid-year admissions and the school admissions appeal process.

In the report were statistics indicating that in terms of parents being offered their preferences in the admissions rounds, Walsall compared favourably to other authorities both regionally and nationally. Further to this, Members requested that Mr Thomas provide further information on the number of families being offered their first, second or third preferences on a year-to-year basis.

Further to questions on the appeals process, which was administered by the Council's Democratic Service team, it was noted that this was also available to academies and voluntary aided schools as a traded service.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

57/21 Education Welfare Service (Attendance) update

A report was submitted to provide information on the law relating to school attendance and the role of the Education Welfare Service [Annexed].

Councillor Towe introduced the report by referring to the legal framework in respect of school attendance and the statutory powers available to the Local Authority. He advised the Committee that on 24 November 2021, the attendance in Walsall's primary and secondary schools was 93.16% and 91.55%, respectively. Absence due to the Covid-19 pandemic had been reported as 19 staff and 77 pupils at 28 schools/settings.

Mr Thomas further explained the legal duties to secure education for children of compulsory school age, with it being a parental responsibility to ensure attendance. He stated that Walsall had a graduated system of response to discuss, engage with and support parents and schools to encourage good attendance for children.

Further to questions from Councillor Kaur regarding children missing education, Mrs Kelly noted that in addition to parental responsibilities, it was the responsibility of schools to ensure that whenever work has been missed, children have the opportunity to catch up. Specialist officers support re-integration to schools and the Education Welfare Service could be procured by schools as a traded service. During the Covid-19 pandemic, remote education – including the use of digital devices – had enabled schools to continue to offer quality of provision. Where there were issues with attendance and exclusions in academies, the Local Authority did not have formal powers of intervention but would challenge via the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Education and Skills Funding Agency.

In response to a question from Councillor Rattigan on elective home education, it was noted by Mrs Kelly that whilst there had been an increase during the pandemic, some parents had now returned their children to school. Mr Thomas added that there had been funding for additional staff to assist in brokering such arrangements and the numbers of home educated children had fallen significantly.

Having regard to the uptake of vaccinations in schools, Mrs Kelly advised that the programme for 12-15 year old pupils had been rolled-out and that it was in line with national vaccination data.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

58/21 Work Programme 2021/22

Members received the Committee's updated Work Programme [Annexed].

Resolved:

That subject to the above-mentioned amendments, the Work programme be approved.

59/21 Forward Plans

Members received and considered the Forward Plans of the Council and the Black Country Executive Joint Committee [Annexed].

With reference to the item: Emotional wellbeing and therapeutic support for children and young people in need, especially in view of the current rise in mental health issues in young children, and further to a request from Councillor Ditta, this would be included in the schools update report to be presented to the next meeting of the Committee. It was also noted that mental health first aider training for Councillors could be arranged via Democratic & Legal Services.

Resolved:

That the Forward Plans be noted.

60/21 Date of next meeting

The next meeting would be held on Thursday, 13 January 2022 at 6.00 pm.

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 7.26 pm.

Chair.....

Date.....