

## **EDUCATION OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**Tuesday, 14 September 2021 at 6.00 pm**

**In the Town Hall, Walsall**

**Committee Members present:** Councillor L. Jeavons (Chair)  
Councillor R. Burley  
Councillor S. Ditta  
Councillor S. Elson  
Councillor S. Johal  
Councillor P. Kaur  
Councillor E. Lee  
Councillor S. Nasreen  
Councillor K. Pedley (substitute for Councillor K. Ferguson)  
Councillor L. Rattigan

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

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

**Officers present:** Mrs S. Kelly, Director – Access & Inclusion  
Ms T. Pyatt, Head of Inclusion  
Mr R. Thomas, Head of Access  
Ms L. Thompson, Virtual School & Vulnerable Groups Lead  
Mr A. Webley, SEND Team Manager  
Dr P. Fantom, Democratic Services Officer

### **29/21 APOLOGIES**

An apology for absence was received from Councillors K. Ferguson and K. Murphy and from Mrs P. Mullins.

### **30/21 SUBSTITUTIONS**

Councillor K. Pedley substituted for Councillor K. Ferguson.

### **31/21 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP**

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

### **32/21 LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985 (AS AMENDED)**

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

### 33/21 **MINUTES**

A copy of the Minutes of the meeting held on 11 March 2021 was submitted [Annexed].

#### **Resolved:**

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 11 March 2021, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved and signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record.

### 34/21 **WALSALL SCHOOLS OVERVIEW REPORT**

A report was submitted to the Committee and a presentation made by officers to provide an overview on Walsall Schools [Annexed].

The Portfolio Holder, Councillor C. Towe, introduced the report. He noted that this provided an overview of the quality of provision of education services in the Borough, highlighted the demographics of Walsall's child population and the key challenges being faced by the Council, together with the work being undertaken by the Access and Inclusion teams in the Children's Services Directorate. Also detailed were the current capital plans to improve and extend the school estate.

The Head of Inclusion, Ms T. Pyatt, provided an overview of the services in her team in terms of SEND and EHCPs, educational psychology, early years, school governance, school improvement and alternative provision. She referred to the re-introduction of Ofsted Section 5 inspections in May 2021, with three Walsall Schools recently having come out of special measures. She also informed the Committee of the robust arrangements for holding schools to account via the schools causing concern protocol introduced in 2018 and the work undertaken with the DfE and the Regional Schools Commissioner to provide challenge where necessary for academies.

The meeting was adjourned from 6.18 pm to 6.23 pm due to technical difficulties.

The Head of Access, Mr R. Thomas, provided an overview of the services of his team in terms of sufficiency of school places, delivery of capital projects, schools admissions and admission appeals, home to school transport, elective home education, and attendance and welfare. Having regard to elective home education, he noted the significant increase over the last year and detailed the processes and range of support provided to children, parents and schools. Reference was also made to the arrangements being made to provide school places in the Borough for Afghan refugee children.

The Virtual School & Vulnerable Groups Lead, Ms L. Thompson, outlined her role as Head of the Virtual School for Children in Care and the work of the education support team to support looked after children and previously looked after children. It was noted that in June 2021 the DfE had extended the power of local authorities to promote the education of children with a social worker or who had previously had a social worker.

The Chair began the discussion by emphasising that schools had not closed during the pandemic, as they had been open for vulnerable children, and had worked online to

continue to provide the best education they could. He was pleased to recognise the efforts being made to provide education to the looked after children.

A Member raised a number of questions concerning fixed exclusions, which had risen in November 2020 and in May 2021:

- Did the Council know if these were from maintained schools or academies?
- Did the Council know the reasoning for the exclusions? Was this due to the impact of the lockdowns? Some teaching had been online but some teachers had not known how to use Microsoft Teams, and this had an impact on learning with some children lacking attention and focus when they returned to schools, which had been detrimental to the behaviour and mental health of some children.
- What support was being provided to schools to enable early identification of mental health issues and to provide support to these children?

In response to these questions, Ms Pyatt noted that the DfE had anticipated that some children might have problems when returning to school following lockdowns and an education for wellbeing return programme had been instituted. Educational psychologists had worked with school SENCOs to support children's wellbeing but a rise in anxiety was expected at all levels/stages and ages. Whilst a structured programme was in place, this did not prevent schools from carrying out fixed term exclusions but the Council continued to support children and young people and schools to deal with anxiety and trauma. It was pointed out by Mr Thomas that the Council did examine school exclusions and the differential between occurrences and types of incident. A report had been presented to the Committee in the last municipal year and Mr Thomas offered either to provide an updated report to a future meeting or to circulate the information to Members via email.

In noting that 80 per cent of Walsall schools had been rated at good or outstanding, which was below the national average of 85 per cent and the West Midlands regional average of 83 per cent, a Member enquired what the Council was doing to bridge the gap regarding schools requiring improvement.

In response, Ms Pyatt stated that the Council worked closely with HMI but that school inspections had been suspended during the lockdown and only resumed in May 2021. Accordingly, and whilst a number of schools were able to come out of special measures, there were some schools that were expected to do so presently, and a number of projects were in place to support this process and to secure good outcome for schools.

Councillor Towe advised the Committee that when reviewing the data, it was to be observed that 88 per cent of maintained schools in Walsall had been rated by Ofsted as either good or outstanding. However, as only 73 per cent of academies had achieved this rating (and for those that had been required to convert to academy status the figure had been 56 per cent), this had reduced the overall percentage figure. The Director – Access & Inclusion, Mrs S. Kelly, added that the data would change as inspections occurred and that the Council's processes were open and transparent.

Councillor Towe requested that his appreciation be recorded for the work of Mr Thomas and his team in bringing the capital projects to conclusion on time and within budget. It was noted that this was unprecedented, especially given the Covid-19 pandemic.

Two questions were raised by the Chair: What tracking processes were in place in relation to elective home education? Clarification concerning the section of the report on complaints in which it was stated: 'The Council has no powers to intervene on behalf of a complainant or a complainant's advocate.'

In response to the first question, Mr Thomas stated that there had been a significant increase in the Elective Home Education team's caseload, which was in line with the national position as some families had chosen to home educate their children as a consequence of the pandemic. Mr Thomas explained the actions that took place, the support available and the follow up measures to ensure regular contact with families when notification was received that parents intended to remove a child or children from school.

In response to the second question, Mrs Kelly explained the responsibilities for administering school complaints. She stated that due to legislative changes in relation to school autonomy, the Authority had a very limited role in the investigation of school complaints, with few exceptions – such as safeguarding concerns or complaints regarding collective religious worship or SEND provision.

**Resolved:**

1. That the report be noted;
2. That updated information on exclusions be circulated to the Members of the Committee.

**35/21 UPDATE ON THE SEND LOCAL AREA IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME AND EHCPs**

A report was submitted to provide an update to the Committee on the SEND local area improvement programme and developments regarding the timeliness and compliance of Education, Health and Care Plans [Annexed].

Councillor Towe introduced this item by noted that the report provided an overview regarding the areas of concern identified by Ofsted in the Written Statement of Action that had been in place since the Ofsted inspection. The DfE had been regularly attending the Board established to monitor the WSoA and the latest feedback was included in the report. The risks and pressures that had arisen relating to the WSoA, together with the mitigating actions being taken, were also set out in the report.

The SEND Team Manager, Mr A. Webley, informed Members that significant progress had been made with respect to the WSoA, particularly in relation to co-production with parents, EHCP processes and timeliness. However, the Covid-19 pandemic had affected this, and there had been significant pressure on the service following the return of pupils to schools,

but mitigating actions and interim resources had been put in place. He noted that the DfE had been pleased with the progress made and the future direction along which the Council was moving, with evidence being collated ready for the expected re-inspection.

Further to Mr Webley's comments, Councillor Towe assured the Committee that a plan was in place and that it was fully funded, in order to clear the backlog and to achieve and then exceed the target relating to EHCP timeliness.

**Resolved:**

That the report be noted.

**36/21 WORK PROGRAMME**

Members received the proposed Work Programme for 2021/22 [Annexed].

The Chair indicated proposed revisions to the Programme, which were the inclusion of an item – Vulnerable Pupils Update – on the agenda for the meeting to be held on 25 November 2021. The items on Admissions and on Attendance Figures were to be combined into a single item, and the reports would be made to the meetings on 25 November 2021 and 31 March 2022.

The Chair invited the Committee to establish a working group for the 2021/22 municipal year. He noted that a topic of the voice of child and young people with SEND had been suggested in the report, as this would build upon the work undertaken by previous working groups on related issues, and which had produced reports whose conclusions and recommendations had been approved by the Council. Further to the suggestion from a Member for a topic concerning the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on education, it was proposed and agreed that these themes be combined and for a working group to be established in order to investigate 'The voice of children and young people with SEND and the impact on this of the Covid-19 pandemic'.

**Resolved:**

1. That subject to the inclusion of the revisions, the Work Programme be approved;
2. That an email be sent to the Committee to invite expressions of interest in becoming a member of the working group.

**37/21 FORWARD PLANS**

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

**Resolved:**

That the Forward Plans be noted.

38/21    **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting would be held on Thursday, 14 October 2021 at 6.00 pm.

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 7.29 pm.

Chair.....

Date.....