

**MINUTES OF THE EDUCATION OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE,  
COUNCIL CHAMBER, WALSALL COUNCIL HOUSE.**

**Thursday 16 February 2023 at 6.00 P.M.**

**Committee Members present:**

Councillor S. Ditta (Chair)  
Councillor B. Bains  
Councillor R. Burley  
Councillor S. Cheema  
Councillor P. Kaur  
Councillor I. Hussain  
Councillor A. Hussain  
Councillor S.B. Hussain  
Councillor E. Lee  
Councillor C. Towe

**Portfolio Holder:**

Councillor Mark Statham – Education and Skills

**Officers Present:**

Sharon Kelly - Director Access and Inclusion  
Rob Thomas - Head of Access  
Loraine Thompson - Virtual School & Vulnerable Groups Lead  
Jack Thompson – Democratic Services Officer  
Helena Kucharczyk – Head of Service for Quality Assurance and Performance Information

Welcome and introductions were made.

**55/22 Apologies**

Apologies were received from Councillors: L. Rattigan, R. Burley and B. Bains.

**56/22 Substitutions**

There were no substitutions of this meeting.

**57/22 Declarations of Interest and Party Whip**

There were no declarations of interest or party whip/

**58/22 Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)**

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

## **59/22 Minutes**

A copy of the Minutes of the meeting held on the 12 January 2023 was submitted [annexed].

### **Resolved:**

**That the minutes of the meeting held on 12 January 2023 a copy having previously been circulated, be approved and signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record.**

## **60/22 Children Not in School Report: Attendance and Exclusions, Children missing education, elective home education and Fair Access (FAP).**

The Portfolio Holder for Education and Skills introduced the item. He informed the Committee that it was the aim of the Council to continue to identify characteristics of good practice to help reduce inequalities and provide a good education for all children with particular focus on vulnerable children. In addition, the Council was aiming to work towards a position where the needs of children are met either in school or through alternative provision. Moreover, that when parents were taking the decision to home education their children that this was a positive decision and not a negative decision made due to a breakdown in the relationships between parents and schools.

The Head of Access explained that the Council understood that there was still an issue with attendance within the Borough. The Council had appointed a special advisor to help address this issue and a special working group had been set up with schools to help tackle attendance. This working group had already helped schools to manage attendance issues. In addition, the Council was running meetings to both advise parents and schools on Elective Home Education (EHE), when requests were made. These meetings had helped to reduce the number of pupils leaving school.

The Head of Service for Quality Assurance and Performance Information took the Committee through the presentation [annexed].

A discussion took place around school attendance and the work the Council was doing to improve attendance. Some of the responses to Members questions included:

- Schools did record absences, but they were often not coded correctly with the reason why, so it was difficult to draw a picture of the main causes for absences. There needed to be a national and local understanding of why absence rates were at a high level to be to help tackle them effectively;

- New legislation on attendance was included as part of the Schools Bill but this bill had been withdrawn from Parliament;
- Many Authorities, including Walsall, were embracing the proposed changes within the Schools Bill and the Department for Education (DfE) were supportive of the need to improve school attendance within the Borough;
- The attendance working group meetings the Council was having with schools helped schools to understand the data on attendance;
- The DfE had launched a national school attendance portal which the Council was encouraging all schools within the Borough to use;
- The Council was the admissions authority for maintained schools only;
- Secondary Schools controlled their own in year applications and that may be why it took longer for children to get a place in a secondary school during the school year;
- Parents had the option of going through the Fair Access Panel (FAP) which met every month to get their child a school place;
- There was evidence of a correlation between the amount of pupils receiving free school meals and the levels of attendance;
- Deprivation did have an effect on the levels of school attendance;
- There was an expectation issue with both parents and schools around attendance;
- Schools needed to develop a whole school approach to attendance;
- The Council was working on creating a partnership approach to attendance to help both pupils and parents;
- The Council had oversight on school attendance.

In response to a Member question on EHE the Committee was informed that a consultation on EHE register did take place as part of the government's preparation for the Schools Bill but the Bill had been withdrawn from Parliament. However, the Secretary of State for the DfE was supportive of introducing a register. The Council had an EHE team who contacted parents who home educated or wanted to home educate, and home visits were carried out. Parents did not have to accept a home visit, but the law required that parents provide an assessment of the education they were providing to their children each year, but the Council went above this requirement and contacted parents termly. If the Council determined that the education of a child being home education was not sufficient it could refer the child to the FAP and if they did not attend the assigned school, legal action could be taken. It was important to note that the Council had a safeguarding duty as well and would refer children to the Multi Agency Safeguarding HUB (MASH) if concerns were raised, however, the data did not suggest that safeguarding was a disproportionate issue for EHE children.

In a follow up question on EHE, Officers informed the Committee that the majority of the EHE was right for children. In addition, that EHE children did not have to follow the national curriculum however neither did academies. There was no barrier for EHE children to take standardised tests.

In response to Members questions on how absences may have affected the attainment level of pupils within the Borough. Officers informed the Committee that there were still issues in early years attainment and pupils then caught up with the national average as they progressed through their education. In addition, despite national attainment dropping, due to the effects of Covid-19, the Borough was closing the gap in attainment. It would help attainment if less children were absence from school especially now that there had been an improvement in the quality of the provision provided. The Council was continuing to work on making sure there were enough school places, however, it remained the parents' legal responsibility to make sure their child attended school.

Members praised the relationship that the Education Team had built with schools within the Borough.

In response to question from a Member on the government funded National Tutoring Programme and Recovery Premium Funding, officers informed the Committee that funding for the Programme was sent directly to schools and was not monitored by the Council. The Portfolio Holder for Education and Skills added that he was involved in the National Tutoring Programme and that schools decided where to spend this additional funding.

**Resolved:**

**That the Committee considered the content of the report.**

## **61/22 Vulnerable Learners Hub**

The Portfolio Holder for Education and Skills introduced the item and informed the Committee that the work that had been carried out by the Vulnerable Learners Hub had been recognised by the team winning the Walsall Council Proud to be One award and they had been nominated the 'better outcome category' at the MJ awards [annexed].

The Virtual School & Vulnerable Groups Lead explained to the Committee that the VLH had two strands; to promote the education of children with a social worker and to reduce the number of exclusions for children with an Education Healthcare Plan (EHCP). The VLH was set up in September 2021 and the number of referrals had increased significantly. The VLH offered tailored training packages for schools to help them raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and 40 schools had already signed up to the training. The funding for the VLH team was provide through a DfE grant and this ended at the end of the academic year, but the Council was hopeful that the funding would continue. Additionally, the VLH team would be putting funding case together if DfE funding was not continued.

The Committee conveyed its congratulations to the VLH team for their award and results of their work.

In response to a Members question on staff recruitment and funding for the VLH. Officers informed the Committee that more staff had been recruited to meet the demand for referrals and this included the recruitment of a data manager. Furthermore, if the level of funding for the VLH increased the Council would be seeking to recruit more staff. Additionally, the Council currently funded the VLH on top of the funding received from the DfE and was hoping to extend the support offered from pupils with EHCPs to those with Special Educational Needs (SEND).

The Portfolio Holder for Education and Skills offered his congratulations to the VLH team and praised them for their success in delivering for children across the Borough.

**Resolved**

**That the Committee noted the impact of the work carried out by the Venerable Learners Hub.**

**62/22 Recommendation Tracker**

The Chair invited the Democratic Services Officer to update the Committee on the recommendation tracker. The Democratic Services Officer informed the Committee that the item on childcare sufficiency assessment should be labelled as complete and not in progress.

**Resolved**

**That the Committee noted the Recommendation Tracked.**

**63/22 Areas of Focus**

The Chair invited the Democratic Services Officer to update the Committee on the Areas of Focus. The Democratic Services Officer informed the Committee of the items for the next meeting were: Accelerated Progress Plan Update, New SEND Inspection Framework and the Special School Provision Plan Update including SEND modelling process.

**Resolved**

**That the areas of focus be noted.**

**64/22 Date of next meeting**

The date of the next meeting was scheduled for the 28 March 2023.

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 19:03.