

EDUCATION OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 11 March 2021 at 6.00 pm

Virtual meeting via Microsoft Teams

Held in accordance with the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020; and conducted according to the Council's Standing Orders for Remote Meetings and those set out in the Council's Constitution.

Committee Members present: Councillor Lee Jeavons (Chair)
Councillor Sarah Jane Cooper (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Gazanfer Ali
Councillor Daniel Barker
Councillor Rose Burley
Councillor Brian Douglas-Maul
Councillor Sat Johal
Councillor Pard Kaur
Councillor Farhana Mazhar
Councillor Saiqa Nasreen
Councillor Vera Waters (Substitute for Councillor Lorna Rattigan)

Portfolio Holders present: Councillor Chris Towe – Education & Skills

Non-elected voting Members present: Mrs Philomena Mullins – Archbishop of Birmingham's Representative

Non-elected non-voting Members present: Ms Sharon Guy – Primary Teacher Representative
Ms Wendy Duffus – Secondary Teacher Representative

Officers present: Mrs Sharon Kelly, Director – Access & Inclusion
Ms Trudy Pyatt, Head of Inclusion
Mr Rob Thomas, Head of Access
Ms Isabel Vanderheeren, Transformation Lead
Mr Alex Webley, SEND Team Manager
Dr Paul Fantom, Democratic Services Officer

14/21 WELCOME FROM THE CHAIR

The Chair opened the meeting by welcoming everyone, and explaining the rules of procedure and legal context in which the meeting was being held. He also directed members of the public viewing the meeting to the papers, which could be found on the Council's Committee Management Information system (CMIS) webpage.

Members and officers confirmed that they could both see and hear the proceedings.

15/21 **APOLOGIES**

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Lorna Rattigan.

16/21 **SUBSTITUTIONS**

Councillor Vera Waters substituted for Councillor Lorna Rattigan.

17/21 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP**

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

18/21 **LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985 (AS AMENDED)**

There were no agenda items that required the exclusion of the public.

19/21 **MINUTES**

A copy of the Minutes of the meeting held on 5 January 2021 was submitted [Annexed].

Resolved (unanimously by roll call):

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 5 January 2021, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved and signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record.

20/21 **SPECIAL REPORT – COVID UPDATE**

A report was submitted to the Committee to provide an update on the Covid-19 guidance for schools (including schools testing), the attendance and opening of schools, remote learning and digital devices, and to set out data on the numbers of Covid cases in schools [Annexed]. In accordance with Minute 10/21, this report had already been circulated to Members as a briefing note and was being presented to the Committee to allow discussion of any of the points detailed therein.

In opening the discussion, the Portfolio Holder – Education & Skills, Councillor Chris Towe, outlined the developments that had occurred since the briefing note had been circulated. He pointed out that as of this week, all children in nursery, special and primary schools had fully returned to schools. Children of secondary school age had also returned, but on a staggered basis, with this being completed by the end of the week. All secondary age children were to have the opportunity to receive three Covid tests in school and all teaching staff were eligible for home testing twice a week. Additionally, any members of a household containing school-age children or school staff were eligible for twice-weekly testing. It was emphasised that this testing was voluntary and children would not be prevented from returning to school if they had not been tested. The Authority continued to

work closely with schools leaders and staff and the trade unions to ensure that all Walsall schools were supported in relation to risk assessments and operation in line with national guidance, and weekly briefings were being held for head teachers and were well attended.

Councillor Towe informed the Committee that following the circulation of the briefing note, the number of Covid cases in Walsall schools had reduced significantly. Since Monday, six schools had been affected with seven pupils having tested as positive, and 102 pupils and 11 members of teaching staff were self-isolating. The attendance figures were noted, which were 95 per cent for primary schools, 85 per cent for special schools and 57 per cent for secondary schools. To provide ongoing remote learning support, £200k of funding had been obtained for additional digital devices for those children in the Reception year and years 1 and 2 who had not been received devices as part of the national programme. These children were identified by their schools as being unable to access remote learning fully and would, therefore, benefit considerably from the availability of these devices.

The Director – Access & Inclusion, Mrs Sharon Kelly, advised the Committee that the return to school of Walsall's children had been a very positive experience for children and families and for school staff, and that the testing programme was working well with there being a high rate of consent in schools and communities. Mrs Kelly expressed her thanks to all of the school leaders and staff, parents, and colleagues in Public Health and the other teams who had been providing support. Ofsted had carried out visits to some of Walsall's schools and had found that the return was both effective and positive.

Further to questions from the Committee on remote learning, Mrs Kelly explained the criteria and the national roll-out programme, which for children in year 3 and above had been led by the DfE. She stated that schools also had an open-ended criteria to accommodate children who were vulnerable and who could not receive remote education due to their lack of a digital device. The aforementioned £200k of funding had allowed provision for children in the Reception year and years 1 and 2.

In relation the mixing of children at school and the testing of both children and their parents, Mrs Kelly referred to the new guidance which had been issued by the Government. Children of secondary school age were eligible for up to three tests per week in school and adults working in a school setting for two tests per week. Where a household contained a school age child or a school staff member, the whole of the household could receive two tests per week via the community testing programme.

Resolved (by assent):

That the report be noted.

21/21 RESPONSE TO THE REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE EDUCATION OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE'S WORKING GROUP ON ACCESS AND INCLUSION

A report was submitted to inform the Committee of the Portfolio Holder's response to the Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee's Working Group's report on Access and Inclusion and to provide Members with an update on progress [Annexed].

Councillor Chris Towe introduced this report and highlighted some of the key developments that had taken place. These included:

- Working closely with parents, carers and young people in order to review the local offer, completing a full audit of the local offer with respect to compliance with the statutory regulations and comparison with other offers considered to be good practice. The new local offer was due to go live before the start of the summer terms and details would be included on the Walsall Council website.
- The secondary school Fair Access Protocol had been rewritten with the input of head teachers, and was now operational.
- The new EHCP hub was now live and would allow the Authority to work more efficiently to produce education, health and care plans.
- In association with the Autism Education Trust, autism training in schools had continued during the pandemic and a three-year programme had been agreed with the Trust to enable the continuation of training and for it to be delivered beyond the education sector, so that it could be accessed by social care, early help, social nursing, and also by parents.

Councillor Towe also advised the Committee that the backlog of EHCPs had now been cleared and that the Authority was now achieving in excess of the national average of 60 per cent and that it aspired to increase this still further. He thanked the SEND Team for their efforts in achieving this.

Further to a questions concerning the date when all new EHCP assessments would be managed via the EHCP hub, Mrs Kelly confirmed that this had already commenced in November 2020 and that as annual reviews occurred they would also be managed through the hub. In response to a request from a Member regarding the positive impact on the number of school exclusions, Mrs Kelly would arrange for data to be provided to a future meeting of the Committee.

Resolved (by assent):

That the report be noted.

22/21 UPDATE ON SCHOOL ORGANISATION – PUPIL PLACE PLANNING

A report was submitted to the Committee that summarised the role of the School Organisation Service, gave an update on pupil place planning for primary and secondary education in Walsall, and which provided background information on capital funding and school expansion schemes [Annexed].

Councillor Chris Towe introduced this item by emphasising the role of the School Organisation Service in ensuring that there are sufficient school places for all children in Walsall. He pointed out that there is an annual plan of work that includes forecasting for future demand and managing the capabilities of all mainstream schools. In relation to capital funding and school expansion, he noted that information was provided in the report on the additional pupil places being created through the expansion of existing schools.

The Head of Access, Mr Rob Thomas, presented the report and referred to the statutory requirements on the Authority for ensuring the availability of sufficient school places and the manner in which the forecasts of the projected future demand for places were then undertaken. The Authority had adopted an annual cycle of school organisation and place planning, which was linked to the DfE School Capacity (SCAP) survey for mainstream schools. Mr Thomas explained that the Borough was divided into 11 primary planning areas and 4 secondary planning areas, as illustrated on the maps given in the appendices, and the report set out information concerning primary and secondary pupil place planning. In terms of school expansion projections, a table summarising the most recent projects that had been completed or which are currently planned was included in the report.

It was noted by a Member that on the basis of the data provided in Appendix B, in secondary planning area 4 there would be a shortfall of 135 school places by 2028. Councillor Towe responded by stating that the Authority was holding discussions with the DfE regarding the possibility of a free school being set up in the Borough and that the location of such a school would be part of the consideration. Mr Thomas added that the free school had been pre-approved by the DfE and the decision to proceed lay with the DfE, but responsibility for school places resided with the Authority which would continue to explore all of the options as part of its place planning activity.

Further to the issue of some parents not receiving a place at the first choice of school for their children, whilst in other schools there was a shortfall of pupils, Mr Thomas reported that 93 per cent of Walsall's parents did receive their first choice of school. It was also noted that parents could specify up to five preferences, and that whilst some schools had differing admission criteria, it was important for the preferences to be managed by the Authority to ensure that there was balance and stability, and to work with schools to provide the necessary challenge and support required.

Having regard to the school expansion projects, Mr Thomas confirmed that the Authority was on track to complete all of the projects that had been agreed. In response to questions on capacity, he added that some schools had accommodation that could be remodelled but, when assessing the feasibility for each school, due consideration had to be given to a number of other factors which included the school infrastructure and the number of teaching spaces, car parking and highways.

Further to a question from the Chair regarding an anticipated increase to the size of the school population, Mr Thomas reported that whilst the national trend had shown a decline, there had been a recent increase which would be factored in to future forecasting activity.

Resolved (by assent):

That the report be noted.

23/21 UPDATE – SEND STRATEGY

A report was submitted to the Committee to provide an update and to consult Members on the SEND Strategy for 2020-2025 [Annexed].

In opening the discussion, Councillor Towe highlighted the aims of the Strategy to turn high aspirations for all learners with SEND into a reality. The Strategy outlined the Authority's vision, principles and priorities to ensure effective collaboration to identify the needs of children with SEND from birth through to the age of 25.

The Head of Inclusion, Ms Trudy Pyatt, informed the Committee that there was a commitment to enabling all schools to be as inclusive as possible, with all pupils working and sharing together, and that this aligned with the Council's Corporate Strategy. The adoption of a graduated approach meant that reasonable adjustments could be made to ensure that children with SEND had their needs met, with there being specialist provision for the children and young people requiring it. In terms of the identification of needs, it was the responsibility of schools to start the process of early identification in conjunction with support from the Authority's SEND Team. Where children were not attending or engaging, the independent SENDIASS Service also existed to provide support to parents and it would challenge schools where necessary.

Members expressed views that were complimentary regarding the quality of the Strategy document, which was considered to be positive and ambitious, uplifting and motivational. The importance of working with the head teachers and staff of the special schools was also referred to by the Committee, particularly for children with significant difficulties and in relation to the support given to their parents.

In concluding the discussion, the Chair shared with the Committee some information relating to family experience, the importance of reasonable adjustments and the long-term consequences when these had not been put in place.

Resolved (by assent):

That the report be noted.

24/21 RIGHT FOR CHILDREN TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME

A report was submitted to the Committee to provide an update on progress against the Walsall Right for Children (WR4C) Transformation Programme and the plans for further development over the next three years to achieve the benefits as set out in the Council's Proud Programme [Annexed].

Councillor Towe noted that since its launch in September 2018, regular update reports on the progress of the WR4C Programme had been made to the Committee. However, this report offered the opportunity to take stock of the achievements made of the last twelve months, to review the priorities and activities planned for the next three years and to receive an overview of how the Programme's impact was being measured. He noted that this work was aligned to the Council's Proud Programme.

A presentation was made to the Committee by the Transformation Lead – Children's Services, Ms Isabel Vanderheeren. This focussed on the three strategic priorities of reducing our demand, developing a highly skilled/stable workforce and co-ordinating and influencing the establishment of a mature WR4C partnership platform to drive

the delivery of the WR4C vision. The supporting report providing the Committee with detailed information in relation to building on transformation successes, the five cross-directorate priorities driven by evidence from the performance framework, Ofsted improvement plans and 'Big Conversations' with children, young people and families, and the Proud cross-cutting capabilities supporting the delivery of transformation and securing of benefits. A Transformation Overview was also presented to the Committee.

In response to questions regarding the holiday activity and the food programme, and whether the number of staff recruited would be sufficient, Ms Vanderheeren advised that this was sufficient as collaboration and partnership working would allow the voluntary sector organisations involved to make administrative economies.

Resolved (by assent):

That the report be noted.

25/21 CORPORATE FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE – QUARTER 3 FINANCIAL MONITORING POSITION FOR 2020/21

Members received a report that provided the budget monitoring position for period 9 in the 2020/21 financial year [Annexed].

The current net revenue forecast position, after the net use of reserves, would be an overspend of £801k, which resulted from pressures with Home to School transport. After mitigating action, the forecast position was an overspend of £437k.

There were no further comments or questions from Committee Members.

Resolved (by assent):

1. That the revenue and capital forecast for the financial year end 2020/21 for the services under the remit of the Committee be noted;
2. That the mitigating actions being taken to address the overspend be noted.

26/21 WORK PROGRAMME

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

Resolved (by assent):

That the Committee's Work Programme be noted.

27/21 **FORWARD PLANS**

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

Resolved (by assent):

That the Forward Plans be noted.

28/21 **DATE OF NEXT MEETING AND CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The date of the next meeting would be approved by the Council in May 2021.

The Chair closed the meeting by thanking the Members of the Committee, the Council's officers and all the staff in Walsall's schools for their work and support throughout the 2020/21 municipal year, and especially during the period of the pandemic. As Portfolio Holder for Education and Skills, Councillor Towe echoed the Chair's comments and expressed his appreciation to the Chair and Members of the Committee.

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 7.50 pm.

Chair.....

Date.....