

Minutes of the Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee held in a Conference Room, Walsall Council House

Tuesday, 22 October 2024 at 6.00 PM

Committee Members present:

Councillor N. Latham (Chair)
Councillor C. Towe (Vice-Chair)
Councillor M. Bird
Councillor S. Ditta
Councillor L. Harrison
Councillor S. Hussain
Councillor E. Russell
Councillor L. Rattigan

Portfolio Holder:

Councillor P. Kaur – Education and Skills

Officers Present:

S. Kelly – Director (Access and Inclusion)
R. Beards – Head of Service (Inclusion)
N. Perks – Quality Assurance Team Manager
L. Thompson – Head of Virtual School
R. Thomas – Head of Access
L. Meredith – Lead Accountant
N. Gough – Democratic Services Officer

The Chair gave welcome and introductions.

84. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor A. Hicken.

85. Substitutions

There were no substitutions for the duration of the meeting.

86. Declarations of Interest and Party Whip

There were no declarations of interest or party whip.

87. **Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)**

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

88. **Minutes**

A copy of the Minutes of the meeting held on the 3 September 2024 were submitted [annexed].

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 3 September 2024 a copy having previously been circulated, be approved, and signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record subject to the inclusion of Councillor Rattigan's apologies.

89. **Inclusion Hub**

The Head of the Virtual School introduced the report and highlighted the salient points. Further detail was provided to set out how the Council was supporting the education of all children in care, care leavers and children with a social worker. The following key points were highlighted to the Committee:

- Training was delivered to schools to raise awareness of the disadvantages that vulnerable children could experience by promoting engagement in education and narrowing the attainment gap.
- The aim of the inclusion hub was to improve the outcomes of these vulnerable children.
- It was noted that the remit of the inclusion hub had been extended to include children within the youth justice system, which had been highlighted as best practice.
- The role of the team was to reduce the number of exclusions for all children, with data indicating that Walsall was performing well – with the lowest number of exclusions (in the West Midlands) for children with Education Health Care Plans (EHCPs).

The Committee commended the work of the team, however it was noted that the Inclusion Hub was funded until July 2025 and questioned the sustainability after this date. The Head of the Virtual School stated that the Department of Education had indicated that the funding would continue, and that further vulnerable groups may be added to the remit of the Inclusion Hub. The Committee agreed that Cabinet should be requested to make provision in future budgets for the Inclusion Hub.

Resolved

1. **That the 'Inclusion Hub' report be noted.**

2. **That Cabinet consider the sustainability of the service in consideration that government funding could cease in the future.**
3. **That Cabinet consider increasing the allocation of the budget to grow the service.**

90. **SEND Developments**

The SEND developments report was deferred until the next meeting, this was to ensure that the most recent data was available to the Committee.

Resolved:

That the SEND developments report be deferred to the next meeting.

91. **Home to School Transport**

The Head of Access presented the report and highlighted the salient points (annexed). The report informed Members how the service meets its statutory responsibilities regarding Home to School Transport. The eligibility criteria was described and it was noted that around 80% of service users were children with EHCP eligible for SEN transport. A significant growth in the number of EHCPs had led to increased costs in the service.

Actions taken to mitigate costs of the service were described, however it was stressed that further cost reductions were needed to operate within budget and manage cost and demand. To do so, a transformation plan had been developed – this had been done through engagement and consultation with other Local Authorities. The plan had commenced, and its impact was being monitored.

A discussion ensued and Members noted the importance of children arriving to school settled and the home to school transport was integral to this. In response to challenge from members, the Head of Access provided further detail on the school led bus model and the benefits that this produced for both schools and the Council. Concern was expressed that this model may create staffing issues and Members considered the suggestion that the Council discussed mutually beneficial plans with providers such as storage of vehicles for preferential rates.

Officers informed the Committee that the home to school transport service was a demand led service and the risks continued to be modelled and monitored monthly to ensure that savings were realised.

Resolved:

1. **That the Home to School Transport Report be noted.**
2. **That the transformation plan is considered at a future meeting of the Committee alongside the impact of the savings proposals.**

92. **Draft Revenue and Draft Capital Programme 2025/26 - 2028/29**

The Portfolio Holder presented the report and highlighted the salient points (annexed). The Lead Account provided informed the Committee that the report contained the draft budget, as reported to Cabinet on 16 October 2024, it included the draft revenue budget for 2025/26 to 2028/29, and the draft capital programme for 2025/26 to 2028/29. It was noted that the revenue budget for 2025/26 was not currently balanced with a gap of c£11m.

The Lead Account noted that growth and demand pressures relating to the remit of the Committee were detailed at appendix 1 of the report and totalled £6.47m over 4 years. Savings proposals relating to the remit of this Committee were shown at appendix 2 of the report and totalled £0.6m over 4 years. In addition, the council funded draft capital schemes relating to the remit of the Committee totalled £0.20m over 4 years, and were highlighted in appendix 3 of the report.

In response to challenge from the Committee, Officers confirmed that opportunities across the Council had been sought to provide savings proposals. Members expressed that it would be helpful for scrutiny committees to be provided with more detail to inform their deliberations of the budget.

In response to questions from Members, Officers confirmed that the controllable budget within the remit of the Education Committee was small due to the nature of funding to these services. The Committee agreed that there was little scope for further savings to the Education directorate.

Resolved:

- 1. The Committee noted the draft revenue budget proposals and draft capital programme 2025/26 – 2028/29 to date that related to the remit of the committee.**
- 2. The Committee noted that the revenue budget for 2025/26 is currently not balanced, with a gap of c£11m.**
- 3. That the Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered that the finite resources available in the Education directorate would not stand any further reductions or savings without putting children at risk.**

93. **Areas of Focus**

Resolved:

That the areas of focus was noted.

94. **Recommendation Tracker**

The Committee received the tracker of recommendations from previous meetings, including progress made and outstanding items.

[Annexed]

Resolved:

That the recommendation tracker be noted.

95. **Date of next meeting**

The date of the next meeting will be held on 19 November 2024.

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 7.10 p.m.

Signed:

Date: