

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

19 November 2024 at 6.00 PM

Committee Members present:

Councillor N. Latham (Chair)
Councillor C. Towe (Vice-Chair)
Councillor M. Bird
Councillor A. Hicken
Councillor E. Russell
Councillor L. Rattigan

W. Duffus (Secondary Teacher Representative)

Portfolio Holder:

Councillor P. Kaur – Education and Skills

Officers Present:

R. Beards – Head of Service (Inclusion)
N. Perks – Quality Assurance Team Manager
R. Thomas – Head of Access
T. Collier – Strategic Finance Business Partner
N. Gough – Democratic Services Officer

The Chair gave welcome and introductions.

96. Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors Hussain, Harrison and Ditta.

97. Substitutions

There were no substitutions for the duration of the meeting.

98. Declarations of Interest and Party Whip

There were no declarations of interest or party whip.

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

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

100. **Minutes**

A copy of the Minutes of the meeting held on the 22 October 2024 were submitted [annexed].

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 22 October 2024 a copy having previously been circulated, be approved, and signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record.

101. **Corporate Financial Performance – Quarter 2 Financial Monitoring Position for 2024/25**

The Portfolio Holder presented the report and highlighted the salient points (annexed). The Strategic Finance Business Partner presented the report and provided further detail, informing the Committee that the report contained the budget monitoring position for period 6 2024/25. The Committee was informed that the forecast revenue outturn for 2024/25 for the services under its remit was an overspend of £2.52m after the use of reserves. It was noted that there had been an increased demand in home to school transport costs, but this was monitored closely.

A period of questioning ensued, and the Strategic Finance Business Partner responded to state that table 6 provided more detail on the savings, noting that cost increases were built into the medium-term financial outturn. A discussion was held in relation to the pressures faced in home to school transport. In response to challenge from Members, Officers provided further detail on mitigating actions. It was noted by the Committee that home to school transport would be reconsidered at a future meeting.

It was agreed that the next meeting of the Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee would be rescheduled to allow further consideration of the draft revenue budget and draft capital programme 2025/26 – 2028/29.

Resolved

The Committee noted the revenue and capital forecast for the financial year end 2024/25 for the services under the remit of the committee.

102. **Mainstream School Pupil Place Planning**

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report and informed the Committee that falling birth rates would lead to surplus primary school places in some areas of the Borough, in contrast to an increased demand across secondary schools. The Head of Access presented the report and highlighted the salient points (annexed).

The Committee sought assurance that where secondary schools were taking extra pupils that the quality of provision did not decline – Officers assured Members that this was funded, fully supported and only at schools where there was demand. Assurance was also sought on the stability of primary schools due to falling numbers, Officers emphasised that regular reviews were held with primary schools where there were concerns, however there were none in the Borough which were financially unstable. A discussion was held around the proposed free school, which would add capacity, and it was agreed that an update would be provided to the Committee once further clarity had been achieved (from Government).

The Head of Access stated that the team were mindful that future housing developments could increase demand for school places. A discussion ensued on the importance of modelling and use of data to ensure that school admission errors did not occur.

In response to a query from a Member, Officers explained that the Local Authority was responsible for the sufficiency of school places and received capital funding to do so.

In response to challenge from the Committee, relating to the development of a free school, the Head of Access stated that there were contingency plans which included Cabinet approval for the expansion of existing schools.

Concern was expressed that falling numbers at primary schools may affect the viability of the free school (should its development be delayed). It was agreed that a further update on the free school should be considered by the Committee.

Resolved:

- 1. That the Mainstream School Pupil Place Planning report be noted.**
- 2. That a further report on the proposed secondary free school and the special free school be provided at a future meeting.**

103. Specialist Provision Plan

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report and informed the Committee that the aim of the report was to provide an overview of the current position of Special Educational Needs and Disability specialist provision planning in Walsall.

The Head of Access spoke to the report (annexed) and provided further detail to the Committee. Members heard that the content of the report linked to the demand for Education Health Care Plans. It was stressed that children with complex needs may require specialist support and the Authority needed to build sufficient capacity.

It was noted that Cabinet had approved the expansion of SEND places and the number of commissioned places at the start of 2024/25 academic year

had increased by 143 places across 7 schools. The Committee was informed that a new special school in Walsall had been approved by the DfE. The introduction of the school would relieve pressure on Walsall special schools. It was suggested that the Free School would open in September 2027 subject to DfE carrying out feasibility studies.

A discussion ensued in relation to the feasibility of the site, and the need for the location of a special school to be in Walsall. Consideration was given as to the potential for savings in relation to home to school transport, although it was acknowledged that it was dependent on the intake.

Members sought further information on the approach to EHCPs, the Head of Service (Inclusion) stated that the backlog of EHCPs had been cleared and EHCPs were completed within the statutory timeframe. The service was focused on ensuring that EHCPs were being appropriately awarded. The Committee challenged the reasons for doing so, Officers responded to explain the reasons for this and stated that the focus was on the right children receiving EHCPs.

Resolved:

- 1. The Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee commended the team for their achievements and work to date.**
- 2. That an update on sufficiency of specialist placements be provided to a future meeting.**

104. School Admissions Update

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report stating that the report would provide an update on school admissions activities. It was noted that Members of the Committee had attended a workshop in school admissions to improve their knowledge in the area. The Head of Access spoke to the report and highlighted the salient points (annexed).

The school admission activities carried out by the Council were described to the Committee, including the way in which it worked with neighbouring local authorities to co-ordinate the phased admissions round. The mid- year admission application process was explained, noting that in Walsall, all secondary schools had opted to co-ordinate their own mid-year admissions application process (as they were their own admissions authority). Members were informed that sessions to assist parents to make school admission applications were ran.

The Head of Access provided detail on the Fair Access Protocol, which was a mechanism developed to ensure that vulnerable children, and those having difficulty securing a school place would be allocated a school place as quickly as possible.

There then ensued a period of questioning, and clarification was provided on the Fair Access Protocol process and the work carried out by the Child Missing Education Team. It was stated that the authority allocates a reasonable school place and pursues intervention if a child does not attend.

Resolved:

That the Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the School Admissions Update.

105. SEND Developments including Dedicated Schools Grant.

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report, informing the Committee that it would provide an overview of the developments and achievements by the Special Educational Needs service during the 2023/24 academic year. The Head of Service (Inclusion) stated that the SEND service had been on a journey of improvement following the Ofsted inspection and Local Area inspections in June 2019 and June 2022. An Accelerated Progress Plan was agreed by the Council, NHS England and the Department for Education. This set out key areas where the Council needed to make progress, and identified actions on how the plan would be achieved. In November 2023, a review of the outstanding areas for improvement took place which concluded that formal monitoring was no longer required, due to the sustained progress against activity.

The Committee was informed that demand for EHCPs remained high, and above the level of other local authorities in the West Midlands and nationally. Improvements to the delivery of the service were detailed, such as recruitment and retention of staff, an induction and training programme, and a dedicated additionally vulnerable learners' caseworker.

A period of questioning ensued, Officers clarified that there was a need to ensure that SEND support was captured and that outcomes were being achieved. It was stressed that mainstream inclusion was important and the correct application of EHCPs. It was noted that a deep dive was underway to understand the situation in individual schools, and the Committee could receive this information at a later date.

Recommendation

- 1. That the Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the SEND Developments including Dedicated Schools Grant.**
- 2. The Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the growing demand for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs).**

106. Areas of Focus

Resolved:

That the areas of focus was noted.

107. **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.

108. **Date of next meeting**

The date of the next meeting would be rearranged, with the date confirmed in due course.

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 7.30 p.m.

Signed:

Date: