

EDUCATION OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

9 OCTOBER 2018 AT 6.00 PM AT THE COUNCIL HOUSE, WALSALL

Committee Members present	Councillor Aftab Nawaz (Chair) Councillor Sarah Jane Cooper (Vice-Chair) Councillor Daniel Barker Councillor Allah Ditta Councillor Brian Douglas-Maul Councillor Lorna Rattigan Councillor Suky Samra Councillor Mark Statham
Portfolio Holders present	Councillor Chris Towe – Education & Skills
Non-elected non-voting Members present	Mr Russ Bragger (Primary Teacher Representative) Ms Wendy Duffus (Secondary Teacher Representative)
Officers present	Ms Sally Rowe, Executive Director (Children’s Services) Ms Andrea Potts, Assistant Director (Early Help, Commissioning and Workforce Development) Ms Connie Beirne, Head of Service (Education Standards & Improvement) Ms Isabel Vanderheeren, Children’s Services Transformation Lead Dr Paul Fantom, Democratic Services Officer
In Attendance: Representatives from E–ACT Academy	Ms Linda Gregory, Regional Operations Director Ms Joanna Hall, Regional Education Director

23/18 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence was received on behalf of Councillors Carl Creaney, Amers Kudhail and Vera Waters, and from Mrs Teresa Tunnell.

24/18 SUBSTITUTIONS

Councillor Suky Samra substituted for Councillor Vera Waters.

25/18 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

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

26/18 LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985 (AS AMENDED)

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

27/18 MINUTES

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 5 September 2018, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

28/18 WILLENHALL E-ACT ACADEMY

The Chair welcomed and thanked the two representatives from E-ACT for their attendance at the meeting. However, he noted with some disappointment the absence of Willenhall E-ACT Academy's Head teacher, Ms Kirsty Jones, who had also been invited to attend. Having received representations from E-ACT's corporate team on two earlier occasions, the Chair stated that it was the Head teacher that the Committee particularly wished to hear from at this meeting. Indeed, he noted that this was actually the third time that she had agreed to attend and then failed to do so, which gave an unfavourable impression to the Committee. E-ACT's Regional Education Director, Ms Joanna Hall, advised that Ms Jones's absence was due to personal reasons.

The Chair invited the E-ACT representatives to provide an update on the issues currently affecting Willenhall E-ACT Academy and on the progress that had been made since March 2018, when E-ACT representatives had met with the former Education and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee/

Ms Hall informed the Committee that she had joined E-ACT as Regional Education Director on 1 April 2018 and that she had strategic oversight of eleven academies. She advised that since March 2017, when Ofsted had placed Willenhall E-ACT Academy into special measures, three monitoring visits had been conducted. The most recent visit being held in July 2018, Ms Hall conveyed that the monitoring inspector had been clear about the next stages and priorities for this Academy, and these had been reflected in the recent letter to the Head teacher from the Ofsted HMI, Rob Hackfath. There had also been recognition for the Academy's staff and pupils, and there was anticipation that special measures would cease by January 2019. Nevertheless, continued support would be required, for example, by the recently introduced 'working alongside' events, targeted working days and work with the Academy's leadership team via the Raising Attainment Board (RAB).

Ms Hall described the Academy's movement through the stages of special measures and stated that steps were being taken make progress on SEND and with some inconsistencies evident in the teaching of science. She was pleased with the improvements made in 2017/18 as related to five key measures critical for the trajectory of progress during 2019. Reference was made to the RAB and the targets

being set in terms of new members of staff, pupil behaviour, and curriculum planning for pupils with SEND and for pupil premium students. Ms Hall expressed confidence that all priority areas were being dealt with. A decision had been made by the Academy to suspend (but not close) Sixth Form provision, which was attributed by Ms Hall to the need to look at the wider context, taking account of the Sixth Form provision at the West Walsall Academy.

E-ACT's Regional Operations Director, Ms Linda Gregory, reported to the Committee that during the summer of 2018 there had been an investment of £100k in a new theatre and other building infrastructure at Willenhall E-ACT. The new theatre was due to open in the near future.

In responding to this verbal report from the E-ACT representatives, the Chair offered his congratulations on the progress that had been made at Willenhall E-ACT Academy, acknowledging that it had been at a very low point when it had been placed into special measures in 2017, which was not good for E-ACT or for the children or the wider Borough.

In regard to the improvements that had been made, a Member expressed concern that overall educational standards for Walsall had been low for some time and enquired what steps were being taken to raise performance in order to meet and exceed national standards. In particular, he was concerned about teaching, discipline and disruption in classrooms and its impact on the children.

Ms Hall affirmed that Willenhall E-ACT Academy would continue to push towards achieving the national standards in 2019 and aim to improve on that subsequently. She stressed that it was important for school leaders to know their pupils and that she had asked all E-ACT head teachers to provide a weekly breakdown on the progress being made by every year 11 pupil in the E-ACT academies. This would assist with analysis, projections and target setting, especially for those pupils on the borders between years 3/4 and 5/6. In terms of other factors, the importance of assessing pupil reading age on entry to the school and matching this to the curriculum was also referred to by Ms Hall, especially given the impact on the aspirations of pupils, their morale and the alleviation of disciplinary problems.

The Vice-Chair echoed the Chair's congratulations, and advised the Committee that she had visited Willenhall E-ACT Academy during the last year. She noted that during her visit, there had been reference to some of the problems experienced in the accessing of mental health services for some children. Ms Hall confirmed that there was funding for a mental health first aid training qualification for staff across the Trust, with 15/16 staff per Academy benefiting from this. In recognising that some children and families had a particular need for these mental health services, a Vulnerable Children Panel had been established, which would sharpen E-ACT's focus in order to track and support families who needed to access these services.

In responding to a question from a Member on whether good practice was being shared, Ms Hall outlined for the benefit for the Committee the relationships between the eleven academies managed by the Trust. She also noted that a strategy plan for the region had been developed and that this clustered activities to ensure that best practice was being shared.

In relation to a question from a Member on the facilities for those pupils exhibiting challenging behaviour, Ms Hall referred to the role of the Innovation Centre at the West Walsall Academy, as this facility could offer smaller group teaching to enable these pupils to make better progress. However, she stressed that this was not a place where disruptive pupils were dumped and underlined the importance of the curriculum offer and of good teaching. Furthermore, Ms Gregory was keen to emphasise that as well as providing higher levels of intervention and support, the benefits would also be felt by other pupils as their lessons were no longer being disrupted. Pupils would be re-integrated into their former classes only when there was confidence that their behaviour had improved and that the other pupils would not be unsettled as a consequence.

Further to the Committee's discussion on improvements in pupil behaviour made at Willenhall E-ACT Academy, a Member identified two areas of continued concern. These were, firstly, a shortage of specialist mathematics teachers; and, secondly, the need for E-ACT to build confidence with the local community.

In relation to the scarcity of specialist Mathematics teachers, Ms Hall pointed out that this was a national problem and was affecting several of E-ACT's academies, so that supply teachers were being used to provide short-term cover. In addition to working with head teachers, a new recruitment pattern was being introduced by E-ACT, which was to have a presence at the NEC Schools and Academies Show in November 2018. Regarding working with the local community, there had been meetings with parents and E-ACT's re-formed Ambassador Advisory Group would have a key role to play in brokering better relationships and ensuring greater engagement as advocates in the local community. In response to a further question from a Member, Ms Gregory confirmed that Willenhall E-ACT Academy currently employed 68 qualified teachers and two full-time agency/supply teachers. Concerns being expressed by a Member regarding teacher retention and staff turnover at Willenhall E-ACT Academy, Ms Hall acknowledged that it was not unusual for schools in special measures to experience staff turbulence with some staff choosing to move on. She emphasised that staff turnover had been stemmed because there was a clearer direction and vision, resulting in greater stability.

A Member having asked what the Academy's biggest operational barriers or weaknesses were, Ms Hall stressed that in the journey out of special measures the key was for there to be consistency, so that the teaching in all departments and subject areas was uniformly good. When discussing the promotion in the media of the work being carried out by E-ACT, Ms Gregory stated that it was a cause of disappointment for both the academies and the children attending them when briefings having been provided to the local press, they declined to report on such positive activities and events.

The importance of work with feeder schools was emphasised by the Chair, and as one of her priorities for the current term, Ms Hall referred to Willenhall E-ACT Academy's work with Reedswood Academy to illustrate this. Members also pointed out that the information provided by feeder schools was beneficial to a child's transition between primary and secondary schools, and in the identification of, for example, dyslexia.

The Portfolio Holder, Councillor Chris Towe, highlighted that when Willenhall E-ACT Academy had been taken into special measures, one of the notable problems had been high levels of absenteeism.

Ms Hall reported that attendance had improved was regularly between 93-94 per cent. Councillor Towe also cited the letter that had been sent to the Academy's Head teacher by Ofsted, which stated that having considered all the evidence he was of the opinion at this time that leaders and managers were taking effective action towards the removal of special measures. It was also noted that E-ACT's investment in buildings at Willenhall had met with Ofsted's approval. Ms Gregory stated that as part of a three-year plan, E-ACT was also looking at the use of land attached to the academies within the Trust.

Councillor Towe was concerned that since September there had already been three permanent pupil exclusions from Willenhall E-ACT Academy, which was more than any other School in the Borough and half the total number for the whole of Walsall. given that the Council was also aware that other exclusions were pending, he asked what was being done to reduce the numbers of exclusions. In responding, Ms Hall confirmed that the number of permanent and fixed term exclusions was reducing but remained higher than desirable. Nevertheless, maintaining discipline was very important and so that restorative justice work was being carried out to address challenging behaviour from children in school and from their parents.

The Executive Director (Children's Services), Ms Sally Rowe, stated that the progress made by the Willenhall E-ACT Academy was absolutely recognised and that it was unfortunate that the Head teacher could not attend this meeting as she would have heard the positive comments from the Committee. Ms Rowe welcomed E-ACT's approach to the use of restorative justice, as described by Ms Hall, and which was complementary to the work being undertaken by the Council. She made reference to the possibility of carrying out joint work with E-ACT in the future.

Resolved:

1. That the Committee noted the progress that had been made so that the Willenhall E-ACT Academy should soon be taken out of special measures and congratulated E-ACT on achieving this;
2. That the Committee recognised the aspirational targets being set by the Willenhall E-ACT Academy and looked forward to receiving evidence of improvement in attainment that would be at the national standard.

29/18 RIGHT FOR CHILDREN TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME

A report on the Right for Children Transformation Programme was submitted [annexed]. This included the plan on a page, providing an overview of the transformation programme, and the right for children needs analysis. The Children's Services Transformation Lead, Ms Isabel Vanderheeren, noted that the programme was intended to provide support to children for the longer term so that good outcomes would be achieved.

Councillor Chris Towe, informed the Committee that the 'Right for Children' vision was launched at the Children's Services Directorate's staff conference on 18 September 2018. This would be driven by a three-year programme with three work streams to re-orientate Children's Services, reducing the need for statutory intervention by building on the capacity of those supporting children, and working with education services to develop and implement a collaborate plan to identify children at risk of losing education or being excluded. The programme would also contribute to a number of corporate plan priorities and the localities when, from April 2019, social workers had been re-located to work from the four locality hubs.

In introducing the report, Ms Vanderheeren highlighted the importance of long-term outcomes to children in schools and also to the reduction in the numbers of looked after children. The proposed change in vision would support this and provide the basis for engaging with education via consultation and conversations with schools. Due to the complex needs of children, it was considered important for social workers to be deployed in the community so that they could work closely with schools when, for example, tackling issues such as domestic abuse, for which additional funding had been provided by the Schools Forum. In response to a question from a Member on this issue, and with schools having to be notified within 24 hours in such cases, Ms Vanderheeren reported that operation 'Encompass' was in place. There had been a first briefing with schools in relation to the information sharing scheme, and it was noted that 80 schools had signed up but 43 schools had still to do so.

Further to discussion regarding ways to improve pupil attendance, Ms Rowe provided examples of schools in which there was good practice and stressed the importance of developing children's aspirations for the future. Councillor Towe added that it was important to ensure that children were suitably prepared when entering school for the first time and that parents had a responsibility for this. The Chair also pointed out that considerable assistance was provided to such parents and especially by working with children and parents in disadvantaged families.

Members having raised the issue of how schools could be held to account for their performance, Ms Rowe emphasised that whilst there were only two non-academy secondary schools remaining in the Borough, the Council worked with the whole range of schools to look at best practice and to share this. She described the approaches being followed, including the use of the 'schools causing concern' protocol, which, on the basis of evidence collated allowed poor performance to be challenged, but emphasised the importance of maintaining a constructive dialogue with Head teachers. She added that the restorative practice model was being employed and that this provided both challenge and support to schools. It was noted that the Chair of the Schools Forum had been invited to attend the next meeting, to be held on 20 November 2018. The Committee was also reminded by the Chair that as many Council Members also served as school governors, they had the opportunity in that capacity to encourage schools to engage with the Council. Similarly, reference was made the role of parent-teacher associations in schools.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

30/18 WORKING GROUP ON SEND, PUPIL EXCLUSIONS AND CHILDREN NOT ACCESSING EDUCATION

The Committee received a report and initiation document [annexed] setting out the objectives and scope of the working group and the timetable and reporting schedule. It was noted that the timescale for the presentation of the final report should be amended, with it being anticipated that this would be presented to the meeting of the Committee to be held on 10 January 2019.

Resolved:

That the report and the initiation document of the working group be approved.

31/18 WORK PROGRAMME 2018/19 AND FORWARD PLANS

Members considered the Work Programme and the Forward Plans of the Council and the Black Country Executive Joint Committee [annexed]. Some amendments to the work programme to facilitate the effective business of the Committee during 2018/19 were also suggested and approved.

Resolved:

That the revised Work Programme and the Forward Plans be noted.

32/18 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting was 20 November 2018.

The meeting terminated at 7.28 pm.

Chair.....

Date.....