

EDUCATION OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 10 September 2020 at 4.00 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 Daniel Barker
Councillor Rose Burley
Councillor Brian Douglas-Maul
Councillor Sat Johal
Councillor Pard Kaur
Councillor Farhana Mazhar
Councillor Saiqa Nasreen
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
Mr Andy Crabtree, SEND Improvement Lead
Ms Trudy Pyatt, Head of Inclusion
Mr Rob Thomas, Head of Access
Ms Lorraine Thompson, Virtual School & Vulnerable Groups Lead
Dr Paul Fantom, Democratic Services Officer

28/20 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.

29/20 **APOLOGIES**

There were no apologies for absence received.

30/20 **SUBSTITUTIONS**

There were no substitutions.

31/20 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP**

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

32/20 **LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985 (AS AMENDED)**

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

33/20 **MINUTES**

A copy of the Minutes of the meeting held on 13 February 2020 was submitted [Annexed].

With reference to resolution (2) of Minute 20/20, it was noted that the further update report on the Jane Lane Special School would now be made to the meeting of the Committee to be held on 3 November 2020.

Resolved (unanimously by roll call):

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 13 February 2020, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved and signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record.

34/20 **WORKING GROUP ON ACCESS AND INCLUSION**

The Committee received the report of the Working Group on Access and Inclusion [Annexed].

The report was introduced by the Chair of the Working Group, Councillor Barker, who noted that the Working Group had interviewed head teachers, parents and carers, and officers of the Local Authority. He emphasised that it had been found by the Working Group that there were important differences regarding perspectives and the types of help needed by individuals and organisations. Furthermore, that given its position as one of the most deprived local authorities in the country, many of the children who were at risk of exclusion from school often resided in areas that had suffered from economic deprivation.

The Portfolio Holder, Councillor Towe, stated that he was pleased to see the report and was happy to support it. He noted that the Local Authority had done a lot of work with

schools during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic and that this had helped to improve the working relationships, which would be beneficial to the schools and to the children.

There was further discussion by the Committee of the report, with Members supporting the recommendations and wishing them to be implemented at the earliest opportunity.

With reference to a question from Councillor Douglas-Maul regarding the work carried out by Hull Council, which had been found to reduce the number of school exclusions, it had been the intention for a visit to Hull Council to be arranged. Unfortunately, this had been deferred due to the Covid-19 pandemic but would be carried out when it was safe to do so.

Further to a question from Councillor Burley on EHCPs, Councillor Towe advised the Committee on the recent progress made and the resources committed. He anticipated that the backlog would be cleared by October, and that from November the Authority should be getting on track to reach the national target for the production of plans. He also advised Members of the improvements to the working relationship with schools, with for example, over 100 head teachers attending a briefing that had taken place earlier in the day. The Director – Access & Inclusion, Mrs Sharon Kelly, added that the improvements being made in respect of EHCPs were being closely monitored by the DfE and the NHS/CCG, and they were happy with the pace of progress. She also emphasised the importance of the work that had been carried out in conjunction with health partners, schools and the trade unions. Further information was provided by the Head of Inclusion, Ms Trudy Pyatt, who informed the Committee of the scrutiny undertaken through the Local Area Improvement Board and the regular meetings with DfE representatives. She noted that the Access & Inclusion team was working at full strength and had benefitted from additional capacity. Also of importance was the recognition that some children would experience social, emotional and mental health issues arising from the Covid-19 pandemic and addressing this would be a priority for the team so that any exclusions could be robustly challenged.

The Committee considered the preferred options for progressing the Working Group's report; namely, whether it should be considered by the Cabinet or by full Council. There was also discussion of how the implementation of the report's recommendations should be monitored, with it being suggested that an update be provided to the Committee on a termly basis and that this should be reflected in the Committee's work programme. In supporting the Working Group's report, Councillor Towe noted the importance of all of the recommendations being implemented in a timely and correct manner.

The Chair expressed his thanks to the Members and the officers of the Working Group, and to all of the people and partner organisations that had participated in the meetings, for their efforts in producing a report with recommendations that would be of benefit to all of the children of Walsall.

Resolved (unanimously by roll call):

1. That the report be presented to the Cabinet for its consideration of the findings and recommendations contained therein;

2. That update reports on the progress being made in implementing the Working Group's recommendations be made to the Committee on a termly basis and that the Committee's work programme be revised to reflect this.

35/20 UPDATE ON THE SEND LOCAL AREA IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME AND EHCPs

A report was submitted to the Committee concerning the SEND Local Area Improvement Programme, developed to address the areas of concern identified by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission in the SEND Local Area inspection in February 2019.

The SEND Improvement Lead, Mr Andy Crabtree, summarised the report, noting in particular the DfE monitoring visit on 5 August 2020, the progress made against the Written Statement of Action, and the progress being made in relation to EHCPs. The report contained a dashboard that had been developed to demonstrate compliance and evidence the clearing of the EHCP backlog. It was noted that the number of assessments had been reduced from 359 on 1 March 2020 to 253 on 24 August, and it was anticipated that the backlog would be cleared by 31 October 2020 so that the number of applications being processed would be reduced to approximately 130 cases.

Councillor Towe informed Members that he was pleased with the progress had been made and that resources had been found to achieve this. He added that the comments received from the DfE had indicated that it was also pleased with the progress being made, and he felt that the Authority would be in a good place by the time of the next inspection.

Further to a question from Councillor Burley regarding monitoring the progress being made, Councillor Towe indicated that he was happy to provide an update on progress to each future meeting. The Chair suggested that the dashboard presentation, as provided in the report, could be used for this purpose.

Resolved (unanimously by roll call):

1. That the report be noted;
2. That progress reports be made to future meetings by means of a dashboard presentation.

36/20 UPDATE ON THE ACCESS AND INCLUSION TEAM'S ACTIVITY WITH SCHOOLS DURING THE PANDEMIC

A report was submitted to the Committee concerning the delivery of support and the activities undertaken by the Access and Inclusion team during the Covid-19 pandemic, and especially since the re-opening of schools for core year groups from 1 June 2020.

In opening discussion of this item, Councillor Towe referred to the immense amount of activity and information that has been transmitted during this time to the Borough's schools. Seminars and briefings had been held, and he had attended every head teacher briefing and school governor seminar, from which he had received positive feedback on

the information that had been provided. He noted that over 1,000 laptops had been distributed in a timely manner to the disadvantaged young people in the Borough to help them to study whilst they were at home. Mrs Kelly also thanked the school leaders, colleagues and the trade unions for their positive response during this time.

The Committee received an overview from each of the Access and Inclusion Team Leaders, detailing the specific work being undertaken by each of their teams.

The Head of Access, Mr Rob Thomas, advised Members of the work that had been carried out with respect to achieving access into schools and monitoring attendance. This included improvement in the sharing of information, the carrying out of home visits in relation to vulnerable children and children missing education, and the consideration of school admission appeals via virtual hearings.

The Head of Inclusion, Ms Trudy Pyatt, highlighted the improved engagement via weekly head teacher and principal virtual meetings. Preparation had commenced on the preparation needed for the Ofsted initial discussion visits scheduled for the autumn term. Work was also being undertaken in terms of the implications for schools of changes to children's social and mental health and their behaviours because of the Covid-19 pandemic. There had been liaison with colleagues in Early Help and with Public Health England, to ensure that the support given to schools during this period had been robust. With reference to the school improvement offer, and because it had been recognised nationally that the attainment gap for disadvantaged children was widening, a project with the Educational Endowment Foundation (EEF) was being carried forward. There had been a range of summer activities for vulnerable learners during the summer break.

The Virtual School & Vulnerable Groups Lead, Ms Lorraine Thompson, provided an overview of the Virtual School and the work being undertaken during the Covid-19 pandemic. This included the allocation of key workers and resources, including over 2,000 devices such as lap top computers that were provided to disadvantaged children and vulnerable young people and care leavers in the Borough.

The Chair thanked all of the school and Local Authority staff who had worked to ensure that children continued to be educated and cared for. He noted the responsibilities for the safeguarding of children, with schools being the first point of contact for disclosures that needed to be followed up, and that this had continued to be achieved during this time.

Councillor Barker supported this view and commended the staff in schools for all of the arrangements that had been during the Covid-19 pandemic. He also referred to the information being provided by schools and requested that the Committee be provided with data on children missing education, including Covid-related absences, and the number of children receiving elective home education in Walsall.

The appreciation of the Members of the Committee and of the Portfolio Holder, Councillor Towe, was expressed to all the staff in the schools and the Local Authority education service for dealing with the frequently changing challenges during the last six months.

Resolved (unanimously by roll call):

1. That the report be noted;

2. That the information on the children missing education, including Covid-relating absences, and those children receiving elective home education be circulated to Members of the Committee.

37/20 WORK PROGRAMME 2020/21

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

Resolved (unanimously by roll call):

That subject to the inclusion of the revisions referred to in Minutes 34/20 and 35/20, the Committee's Work Programme be approved.

38/20 FORWARD PLANS

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

Resolved (unanimously by roll call):

That the Forward Plans be noted.

39/20 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting would be held on Tuesday, 3 November 2020 at 6.00 pm.

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 5.38 pm.

Chair.....

Date.....