

**11 March 2021**

**Response to the report and recommendations of the Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee's Working Group on Access and Inclusion**

**Ward(s): All**

**Portfolios: Councillor Chris Towe – Education and Skills**

**1. Aim**

This report has been produced to inform the Committee of the Portfolio Holder's response to the Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee's working group's report on pupil exclusions and to update on progress.

**2. Recommendations**

That the Committee note the activity that is in place and the progress made to date to address the recommendations outlined in the working group's report.

**3. Report detail – know**

At its meeting on 18 June 2019, the Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee received a presentation from officers on the proposed areas of focus for 2019/20 and Members discussed what were to be the Committee's main priorities for the municipal year. This facilitated the preparation of the Committee's work programme, including the establishment of a working group, which was approved at the meeting on 3 September 2019. In establishing a working group for 2019/20, the Committee agreed that the principal area for review should be access and inclusion in relation to Walsall's primary, secondary and special schools. This review would build on the foundations of the work undertaken in 2018/19 and conduct an in-depth examination of these issues.

The group held five meetings in total, the first of which took place on 26 September 2019. Terms of reference, key areas for review, the people who were to be invited to meet with the group and the data that would be required were agreed at the first meeting.

The Working group identified the following key areas for review:

- The Local Authority's responsiveness to meeting the demands of parents and schools with reference to the exclusion of pupils from schools in Walsall.
- The effectiveness of the policies and procedures of schools and the Local Authority in relation to the issue of exclusions.
- An assessment of the main reasons for exclusion of children from schools and the practice of 'off-rolling'.

The aim of the review was for the working group to provide an insight into these issues and the impact that they are having on children, families, teachers and school leaders.

In carrying out the review, the working group was informed by the engagement it had with the relevant professionals, including staff from the Walsall Council Children's Services Directorate, head teachers of Walsall schools and a number of parents whose children have been excluded from school. The working group were grateful for this and the particular perspectives and views that were provided because it enabled councillors to frame and set out their findings systematically and to formulate appropriate conclusions.

The review produced a number of recommendations that it is believed would assist in alleviating some of the problems being encountered:

1. That Walsall Council's local offer to schools should be developed to ensure that more resources are readily available to equip schools to cope better with difficult behaviour from children with special needs.
2. That Walsall schools and their HR providers should be encouraged to ensure that their policies support the recruitment and retention of high quality members of staff to address most effectively the particular needs of Walsall children.
3. That further guidance and support be given to schools to ensure that when they are dealing with uncooperative parents, the powers available to the schools are fully understood and used effectively and appropriately.
4. That the Fair Access Protocol, which is co-ordinated by the Local Authority but which has to be agreed by and owned by the schools adhering to it, should have a true consultation period.
5. That via the local offer to Walsall schools, which are able to buy in the service from the Local Authority, support for SENCO and training on autism and anxiety issues should be increased so that both teachers and professionals have a better understanding of Walsall children.
6. That the Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) process should be speeded up as far as is practicable, be made easier to understand, and be more responsive/flexible and accountable to the wishes of parents and carers.

Work is already progressing in some of these areas including:-

**Recommendation 1 and 5:** We have established a working group to develop the Local Offer consisting of officers, school staff, parents, children and young people and other partner professionals. This group audited all Local Area SEND inspections and identified those that had been commended as having exemplar Local Offers. All these sites were reviewed and our own local offer audited against them. The group also reviewed a variety of platforms that are used to host these Local Offers and have designed a new user friendly platform for Walsall, in partnership with parents, children and young people to ensure it holds the content that is needed and is user friendly. The platform is currently being developed and trialled and will go live in Spring Term 2021.

**Recommendation 2:** Training is being developed and rolled out to all schools covering good practice guidance, practice and policy for teacher recruitment. This is delayed slightly due to COVID and is currently being delivered virtually.

**Recommendation 3:** Due to the COVID pandemic, all support to schools with parental engagement has focused on supporting the reopening of schools, addressing parental anxieties and supporting pupil and parent mental wellbeing. Future work will include support for schools and parents, as identified in the recommendation, once schools are fully reopen.

**Recommendation 4:** The Fair Access Protocol, which is co-ordinated by the Local Authority but which has to be agreed by and owned by the schools adhering to it, has had a true consultation period with secondary heads and a protocol has been agreed. This was fully adopted and implemented by the secondary heads in December 2020.

**Recommendation 6:** The EHCP assessment and review process is being streamlined, simplified and developed to be more responsive, flexible and accountable to the wishes of parents and carers through the implementation of an online EHCP Hub. This system will be open for all users including parents, carers, children and young people and will provide a real time overview of the progress of assessments, support the contribution of professionals, parents, carers, children and young people to their assessments and reviews and enable finalised plans to be accessed at any time.

A working group was established to review a variety of online platforms and consisted of professionals from the Local Authority, schools, parents and carers. The working group recommended the Open Objects EHC Hub which was procured.

A project team was instigated to implement the EHC Hub and ensure it meets the needs of all users. The EHCP Hub was trialled from June 2020 until November 2020. From spring 2021, all new EHCP assessments will be managed on the Hub. Existing EHCPs will be transferred to the Hub at the point of their annual review over the next 12 months. This means all EHCPs will be managed via the HUB by April 2022.

#### **4. Financial information**

EHCP hub funded through Directorate budget.

#### **5. Reducing Inequalities**

It is often the most vulnerable learners who struggle to access education that meets their needs or suffer from inequalities as a result of poor systems and processes. Ensuring that these learners across the borough have access to high quality educational provision that meets their needs will raise standards and improve outcomes for all of Walsall's children.

**6. Decide**

Scrutiny to acknowledge current progress and developments.

**7. Respond**

The recommendations from the working group will be actioned by council officers as part of the ongoing SEND and inclusion improvement work.

**8. Review**

Progress against the recommendations will be reviewed within 6 months through the Education Scrutiny Committee.

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