

EDUCATION OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 17 February 2022 at 6.00 pm

In the Council Chamber at the Council House, Walsall

Committee Members present:

Councillor L. Jeavons (Chair)
Councillor K. Murphy (Vice-Chair)
Councillor R. Burley
Councillor S. Ditta
Councillor S. Elson
Councillor K. Ferguson
Councillor E. Lee
Councillor N. Gandham
Councillor S. Samra
Councillor R. Worrall

Portfolio Holders present: Councillor C. Towe – Education & Skills

Non-elected non-voting Members present:

Sharon Guy – Primary Teacher Representative

Wendy Duffus – Secondary Teacher Representative

Officers present:

Sharon Kelly, Director – Access & Inclusion

Rob Thomas, Head of Access

Paul Fantom, Democratic Services Officer

Isabel Vanderheeren, Transformation Lead, Children's Services

In Attendance:

Cathy Draper – Headteacher providing Local Authority support

Kate Burgh – Headteacher providing Local Authority support

13/22 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received for Councillors S. Johal, Councillor P. Kaur, S. Nasreen and L. Rattigan

14/22 Substitutions

The following Members substituted at the meeting:

Member	Substitute
Councillor P. Kaur	Councillor N. Gandham
Councillor S. Johal	Councillor S. Samra
Councillor S. Nasreen	Councillor R. Worrall

15/22 Declarations of interest and party whip

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

16/22 Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)

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

17/22 Minutes

A copy of the Minutes of the meeting held on 13 January 2022 was submitted [Annexed].

An amendment to the minutes was requested to show that Councillor S. Nasreen, rather than Cllr Bashir, substituted for Councillor S. Ditta.

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 13 January 2022, as amended, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved and signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record.

18/22 Specialist Provision Review

The Committee received and considered a report providing an overview on Special Educational needs and Disability (SEND) specialist provision planning in the Borough [Annexed].

The Portfolio Holder, Councillor C. Towe, introduced the report. To help the authority with the development of school services, two headteachers, Cathy Draper from the Shortheath Federation and Kate Bargh from the North Start Federation have been recruited on part-time secondment. The forecast demand for school places sees a shortfall in the next five years in special schools and for specialist places in mainstream schools. A specialist provisions group has been created to address the immediate issue of admissions for the 2022-23 academic year. A more detailed review will allow for better planning to meet the long-term issues.

Head of Access provided an update on the work of the Specialist Places Review group and the forecasted demand over the next five years. This is supported by the two headteacher colleagues, coordinating work with schools. Mrs C. Draper outlined that the objective of the Specialist Provision Review Group is to improve current processes and restructure provisions to improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND. The Group is working with colleagues from Health, Education and Social Care, plus children and families. The two focuses for the Action Plan are the protocols in place to support inclusive practice and the review of specialist places. Inclusive practices include High Needs funding, data analysis of requirements; service pathways; inclusive practice and ensuring schools have skills; and all transition points, particularly early-years, post-16 and from primary to secondary schools. Concerning specialist settings, the current review is focussing on the immediate and future needs, gathering data which can be constantly reviewed. Out-of-Borough places will also be brought into this in the future.

Responding to an enquiry from the Chair as to how the foreseen shortfall in places over the next five years would be addressed, the Head of Access identified possible solutions including discussions with existing specialist schools concerning increasing capacity and the Hub Model, which seeks to find ways of increasing specialist places

in mainstream schools for this coming September. In the long-term, feasibility studies include expanding existing schools, remodelling and even a new provision for the Borough.

The Head of Access stated that the fluctuation in expected shortfall over five years is due to existing children in year groups as they work through the school system. With regards to a query as to whether schools could take extra students as they are already at capacity, Head of Access responded that while there would be some opportunity to remodel, there would need to be significant capital strategy to expand existing provision and this would take into account where space exists. Any such strategy would come back before Members and cabinet.

One Member sought reassurances that it would not be the case that children with SEND would end up out of school due to a problem of oversubscribed schools, as this has been an issue with non-SEND children she has dealt with. The Portfolio Holder expressed concern as to whether statutory requirements were being met in these cases and enquired as to whether they had been raised with officers. The Member confirmed that they have and have now been resolved but was concerned with the process and time taken. The Portfolio Holder advised that any such issues should be reported immediately to the Senior Officer in future. The Director (Access and Inclusion) stated that the partnership model, working with schools, will ensure this will not happen.

Director (Access and Inclusion) stated that the processes being put in place would assess the needs of specialist provision and see what could be accommodated within the current system in response to a Member's concern as to the language used with regards to a review for a new Free School. The Hub model could widen specialist skills in mainstream schools and there was a desire not to action towards a new Free School if it was not clear there was a need for it. The Portfolio Holder added that integration of students with SEND in mainstream schools was desirable except in the most complex cases.

Addressing a question concerning the partnership dynamic between Local Authority and schools, the Director (Access and Inclusion) and Mrs Bargh reassured the Committee that it is a voluntary partnership. There has already been a good response from schools. Funding for specialist support will be in line with that of other school places and from schools, responded Director (Access and Inclusion) to a Member query as to whether there would be an increase in staffing to enable the expansion of specialist provision.

Regarding a Member enquiry as to criteria for schools to qualify for expansion, the Director (Access and Inclusion) stated there will be two aspects, a physical requirement, for example, schools must have suitable space, and a quality requirement, that schools must be 'good' or on an improving trajectory.

Finally, the Director (Access and Inclusion) agreed that it was important children were placed in the right schools, responding to a Member query, and that though there is a legal requirement to educate children in mainstream schools there are those for whom others are required. She added that much of the work concerning inclusion is aimed at ensuring staff in mainstream schools are trained and have the skills required to accommodate children with SEND.

The Chair requested the following data be provided in writing to Members of the Committee:

1. How many special school places do we have?
2. How many of these children are out of the Borough?

Resolved:

That:

- 1) the report be noted**
- 2) further information and updates should be brought before the Committee in the future.**
- 3) the following information be provided to Members in writing:**
 - a) How many special school places do we have?**
 - b) How many of these children are out of the Borough?**

19/22 Elective Home Education

The Committee received and considered a report providing the current position concerning Elective Home Education (EHE) and an update on how the Council meets its statutory responsibility regarding EHE [annexed].

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report which provides an update on the work which has taken place since the previous report on EHE presented in January 2021. That report set out the statutory requirements with regards to pupils in EHE. The number of children and young people receiving EHE had decreased to 380 cases as of the end of December 2021, which is viewed as a welcome trend. Extra staff have been taken on since the previous report, to assist in supporting families engaged in EHE.

The Head of Access identified that there are now 380 pupils, down from 463, and additional staff have enabled a more personalised dialogue, which has been especially important for engaging with those families who opted for EHE due to anxieties during the COVID-19 pandemic. Registration levels for EHE are now similar to pre-Covid-19 levels. A positive outcome of a quality audit was received and Ofsted have highlighted that there are positive relationships and outcomes with EHE services and that a robust oversight system is in place.

Responding to safeguarding concerns raised by Members and how we know pupils in EHE are safe, the Director (Access and Inclusion), stated that there are robust measures which have been strengthened by the increase in staffing. These include the need for EHE to be initially approved, annual assurances that requirements are being met and the existence of a statutory process, whereby children can be put back into mainstream schooling if there is a lack of cooperation. Most families engaged in EHE are cooperative and engaging. The Director (Access and Inclusion) added that the need to operate within statutory limits and the importance of messages that safeguarding is everybody's responsibility are successfully given out. There is a consultation out as to whether to keep a register of those on EHE.

The Director (Access and Inclusion), responding to Member questions regarding the effectiveness of reintegration packages, stated that there have been successes as shown by the reduction in EHE cases and this is the reason having conversations

with families is so important. Having conversations can mediate the reasons why families opt for EHE and can bring children back into mainstream schools, as well as identify trends. The Head of Access added that short-term interventions are often needed when children do not get into their school of choice, for which support is provided to encourage reintegration and support learning needs whilst children are temporarily out of schools.

With regards to questions concerning the importance of anxiety in decisions by families and children, the Director (Access and Inclusion) explained that anxiety can exist in children and parents, but that the work done by specialist staff and the pre-EHE meeting can mitigate these concerns, alongside inclusion work in school to ensure staff can spot signs of anxieties.

Resolved:

- 1) That the report be noted**
- 2) That further information and updates on the progress of elective home education should be brought before the Committee in the future.**

20/22 Early Years Sufficiency Places

The Committee received and considered a report concerning the Council's statutory duties under the Childcare Act 2006, how these statutory duties are fulfilled and how the Childcare Sufficiency Assessment is undertaken key information from it [annexed].

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report, noting what was set out in the Childcare Act 2006 including the Council's statutory requirement to publish information concerning the provision of and demand for education places within the borough. A Childcare Sufficiency Assessment (CSA) has not been published in Walsall since 2016, so one has been commissioned with market leader Hemsall's. Once completed later this year, it will be published onto the Family Information Service website. This will be reviewed annually to meet statutory requirements.

Pending the report's publication, the Portfolio Holder reported that there is currently sufficient capacity in schools to meet demand and offer choices with regards to childcare provision. Head of Access reiterated that there is currently sufficient capacity within the Borough for childcare provision and that take-up of offered places is decreasing. Further monitoring of this trend will be required in case there is a change in demand.

Regarding a question from a Member about whether the present falling demand was related to the COVID-19 pandemic and whether there may be a subsequent increase in demand, coupled with increased demands in areas undergoing regeneration, the Head of Access reaffirmed these as reasons for the need to continue monitoring trends in demand, including through the CSE.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

21/22 Walsall Right for Children Transformation Programme

The Committee received and considered a report providing an update on the progress of the Walsall Right for Children (WR4C) Transformation Programme [annexed].

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report on the WR4C Transformation Programme which was launched in September 2018 to help create systemic change to ensure children were receiving effective and timely help and are happy, healthy, safe and learning well. The Portfolio Holder praised the programme and its delivery, highlighting that the Borough's Children's Services are now rated 'Good' by Ofsted and that the objective of the programme was now to achieve the Council's vision by working alongside partners, community co-production and integrating services and processes.

Transformation Lead (Children's Services) updated the Committee that significant work has been undertaken in the last four years within Children's Services and that the focus is increasingly on working with partners. The Big Conversation Programme held a daily conversation through the summer to find out children's views on growing up in Walsall, ensuring a child-centred approach. The Children and Young People strategic partnership has been established and will work alongside other partners. Wider strategic partnerships are being established to engage with issues of systemic relevance. Partnerships with voluntary and community groups are being strengthened to help meet short- and long-term objectives, alongside helping to improve information access through the Proud Customer Access Management work stream and local voluntary hubs. Finally, partnerships with professionals and practitioners are being invested in through providing specialist support and engaging with national initiatives to help support schools. It is hoped uptake of the latter will increase as we emerge from the effects of COVID-19.

Responding to enquiries from Members as to the findings of children's surveys and if they highlighted particular issues such as lack of out-of-school offerings, the Transformation Lead stressed there was a wide variety of responses and that many concerns were similar to those given by adults, such as concerns about litter, safety and green spaces. Lack of 'positive activities' was a thematic issue being addressed through the Department for Education's Holiday Activity and Food Programme, encouraging local provision of activities for children and young people, especially during school holidays. There is detailed information about where survey responses have been received from, with data per locality, which is being fed into several programmes and partners.

With regards to an enquiry as to the sufficiency and sustainability of funding for the Holiday Activity and Food Programme, the Transformation Lead stated that there is presently funding for three years from the Department for Education, though there has already been an increase in eligibility and DfE funding will remain unchanged annually. The current approach to managing resources lends to a belief that there is currently sufficient funding and space for growth, especially through partnerships. The Director (Access and Inclusion) explained that the focus on local partnerships should help ensure sustainability of the programme after DfE funding ends.

Transformation Lead added that there is an ambition to continue the conversations with children and young people on a yearly basis, to find if views are changing and if actions have delivered on what children have asked for.

The Chair acknowledged the focussing on the practicalities of WR4C and noted that this piece of work has started to transform the future of youngsters in Walsall, giving thanks for all the work of Children's Services staff.

Resolved:

That the report and progress being made be noted.

22/22 Work Programme 2021/22

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

Resolved:

That the Work Programme be noted.

23/22 Forward Plans

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

Resolved:

That the Forward Plans be noted.

24/22 Date of next meeting

Prior to the close of the meeting Councillor Towe reported that 16th February 2022 had seen the highest attendance at schools since coming back in January, with 94.5% in primary, 92% in secondary and 88.5% in special schools.

The next meeting would be held on Thursday 31 March 2022 at 6pm.

There being no further business this meeting was terminated at 7.16 p.m.

Signed:

Date: