

EDUCATION OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 30 June 2022 at 6.00 pm

In the Town Hall at the Council House, Walsall

Committee Members present:

Councillor S. Ditta (Chair)
Councillor S. Elson (Vice-Chair)
Councillor R. Burley
Councillor B. Bains
Councillor S. Cheema
Councillor P. Kaur
Councillor L. Rattigan
Councillor C. Towe

Portfolio Holders present: Councillor M. Statham – Education & Skills

Non-elected non-voting Members present:

Primary Teacher Representative

Secondary Teacher Representative

Officers present:

Sharon Kelly, Director – Access and Inclusions

Rob Thomas, Head of Access

Judith Nash – Head of Service Inclusion

Lorraine Thompson – Head of Virtual School

Jack Thompson - Democratic Services Officer

01/22 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received for Councillors A. Hussain, I. Hussain and S.B. Hussain.

02/22 Substitutions

There were no substitutions.

03/22 Declarations of interest and Party Whip

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

04/22 Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)

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

05/22 Minutes

Councillor Rattigan requested that she be recorded as in attendance at the meeting on the 31 March 2022.

Resolved

That the minutes of the meetings held on 17 February and the 31 March 2022, as amended, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved and signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record.

06/22 Areas of Focus 2022-23

The Chair invited the Portfolio Holder for Education and Skills, Councillor Mark Statham, to give an overview of his priorities for the coming municipal year.

The Portfolio Holder began by thanking the Chair and Members for being invited to meeting. Also, the Portfolio Holder stated that it was the view of the Executive of the Council that Scrutiny was a critical friend and that scrutiny led to positive outcomes for the Council.

The Portfolio Holder highlighted their priorities for the municipal year. These included: Walsall Right 4 Children, adapting to the changes in national legislation and improving the ways the Council achieve positive outcome.

The Director of Access and Inclusion took Members of the Committee through a presentation [Annexed] outlining the services the Council delivered through Access and Inclusion and the upcoming changes to national legislation. During this presentation contributions were made by the Head of Access, Head of Inclusions and Head of the Council's Virtual School.

At the end of the presentation the Chair invited members to ask question to officers and the Portfolio Holder. Some of the responses to the questions included:

- The Department for Education (DfE) expected all schools to become academies or have plans to become academies by 2030. Furthermore, it was still up to governors to decide whether to academize, however, if a school was found to either be 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement' by Ofsted for two concurrent Ofsted inspections, the DfE could issue an order to make a school academize. These orders could now be issued by regional Schools Commissioners on behalf of the Secretary of State for Education. Additionally, the Council was not encouraging schools in the Borough to become academies, rather, it was encouraging schools to work together whether as part of an academy group or school federation;
- In terms of the number of academies compared to maintained schools, the Borough was on par with the rest of the Country. In addition, just like the rest of the Country more of the Borough's Secondary Schools had academized compared to Primary Schools;
- The Borough had become a net importer of children from outside the borough to schools for the first time in many years. The Council was conducting further modelling to ascertain how many places for Secondary Schools were needed;
- The Council was considering the new development taking place under the Black Country Plan and how that might put pressure on amount of school places. Work was being undertaken to review sites for a potential Free School in the borough and no site had been chosen at the time of the meeting, but the Department for Education had selected a preferred site for the school. The new free school was scheduled to open in 2025 though talks were taking place to have temporary accommodation ready for 2023. The school was planned to take in year 7 to start with and then expand year on year and

move to the new building by 2025. In total the school would have 1150 places including a six form;

- The Borough needed reduce the number of absent children from schools as the average was higher than the national and the Councils statistical neighbours. The new Children not in School Bill would set out clear responsibilities for both schools and Local Authorities (LAs). Likewise, the Bill would strengthen the legal fines that could be given to parents and the recourse available to schools. However, officers were keen to stress that the legal responsibility of making sure a child attended school remained with the parents/guardians of the child;
- The Council carried out home visits for those children who did not attend school consistently. Additionally, schools had their own attendance officers to help enforce attendance and the Council had legal oversight of powers regarding attendance;
- There was a post Covid-19 trend for the reason why school absences were high, this was mainly because of anxiety amongst children returning to the classroom. Recently, however, the level of anxiety was decreasing, and schools had done a lot of work on helping to bring those children struggling back into the classroom. There were still some children not returning to school and some schools/areas were still experiencing issues with attendance;
- The Council could influence schools and make change when there was a good a relationship with school leaders. For example, the Council was working with schools through the Schools Forum to try and pool the School Improvement Grant so that money could be targeted to schools who needed it most;
- At the time of the meeting around 12 children from Ukraine had needed school places within the Borough. Not as many Ukrainian families had decided to immigrate to the area as seen with Afghan families. However, the Council had been successful in finding places for children from Afghan families and believed it would be able to find places if more Ukrainian families decided to immigrate to the Borough;
- For Education Health and Care Plans all councils were bound by a 20-week statutory process. Only 53% of EHCP across the country were completed within the 20 weeks. The Council had improved their process over the past few years and at the time of the meeting the Council was processing 52% of its EHCP applications within the 20-weeks statutory period. The Council was also putting in an improvement plan for the annual review of EHCPs;
- At the time of the meeting the outcome of the Ofsted inspection on the Council SEND services was still embargoed and thus could not be commented on;
- Childhood obesity was a problem at schools across the Borough and this was being addressed by the Public Health team at the Council. The Public Health team worked alongside school nurses to help children and families struggling with these issues. Furthermore, the Schools White Paper proposed that schools have food standards, introduce a food curriculum and a food policy;
- Teen Pregnancy was addressed at school level and by the Public Health Team which helped schools by running programmes to help prevent teen pregnancies and to help those who have become pregnant while still at school;

- The Borough was below the national level in terms of the Good Level of Development for Early Years. This was an area which needed greater improvement and would be an area of focus for the Council;
- The Borough had enough nursery places to meet demand and up take of places had reached pre-covid levels;
- The cost-of-living crisis would have a significant effect on children in the borough and their education. The Borough already had a high level of child deprivation and a high number of children living in poverty, these are going to increase during the crisis. Schools will also struggle because of the rise of energy costs which will put pressure on budgets;
- Since 2019 the majority of the schools within the Borough had improved their Ofsted rating or maintained a Good or Outstanding grade. However, it was important to note that these figures can only improve as quickly as schools in the Borough were inspected so the progress appeared slow;
- At the time of the meeting only two schools within the Borough were graded by Ofsted as inadequate. These schools received help from the Council and a team for each school was put in place led by the Council's Challenge Education Consultant and subsequently both schools improved. It was important to note that due to the changes in funding the Council lost the School Improvement Grant in March 2022 and this money was now given to schools.

At the end of the questions the Chair invited the Principal Democratic Services Officer to report on incomplete items from the previous year, budget scrutiny and working groups for the year 2022/23 [Annexed].

The Chair then invited members to contribute items for Committee areas of focus over the coming municipal year. The contributed items were:

- School attendance, School attendance bill and Children not in school bill
- SEND and EHCP (meeting targets), alternative provision green paper
- Briefing on OFSTED when available
- Education and Home Learning
- Fair access to all children
- Transitioning from schools
- Making sure the council has provision in place in terms of the Black Country Plan
- Children not in school (linked to both attendance and elective home education)
- School place planning (linked to provision of school places)
- Walsall Right 4 Children
- Schools White paper
- Education Investment and priority areas
- Improving the number of good and outstanding schools
- Attainment and improving educational outcome

The Principal Democratic Services Officer also noted that Councillor Rattigan's suggestions of teenage pregnancies and overweight children be recommended to the Social Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee as these items fell within its remit.

The Director of Access and Inclusion noted the suggested items from members and suggested that these should be put into themes so that similar or linked items could be

discussed at a future meeting together and would allow members to explore them in more detail.

The Chair agreed to meet with the Director for Access and Inclusion to discuss the themes of future meetings and once these were agreed they would be relayed to members of the Committee.

Resolved:

That:

- 1. the following items be agreed as the Committees Areas of Focus for 2022/23:**
 - a. **School attendance, School attendance bill and Children not in school bill;**
 - b. **SEND and EHCP (meeting targets), alternative provision green paper;**
 - c. **Briefing on OFSTED when available;**
 - d. **Education and Home Learning;**
 - e. **Fair access to all children;**
 - f. **Transitioning from schools;**
 - g. **Making sure the council has provision in place in terms of the Black Country Plan;**
 - h. **Children not in school (linked to both attendance and elective home education);**
 - i. **School place planning (linked to provision of school places);**
 - j. **Walsall Right 4 Children;**
 - k. **Schools White paper;**
 - l. **Education Investment and priority areas;**
 - m. **Improving the number of good and outstanding schools;**
 - n. **Attainment and improving educational outcome.**
- 2. A copy of the completed work programme for the year be circulated to Members.**
- 3. That the suggested items on teenage pregnancy and overweight children be referred to the Social Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee as potential items**

07/22 Date of next meeting

The next meeting would be held on the Tuesday 6 September 2022 at 6pm.

There being no further business this meeting was terminated at 7.24 p.m.

Signed:

Date: