

Minutes of the Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee held in the Council Chamber, Walsall Council House

Thursday, 15 February 2024 at 6.00 PM

Committee Members present:

Councillor N. Latham (Chair)
Councillor P. Kaur (Vice Chair)
Councillor P. Gill
Councillor T. Jukes
Councillor E. Morgan
Councillor L. Rattigan
Councillor G. Singh-Sohal
Councillor C. Towe

Portfolio Holder:

Councillor M. Statham – Education

Officers Present:

C. Male – Executive Director (Children’s Services)
S. Kelly – Director (Access and Inclusion)
J. Kaur-Gill – Employment and Skills Manager
R. Thomas – Head of Access
A. Nash – Post-16 and Alternative Provision Manager
J. Nash – Head of Inclusion
N. Gough – Democratic Services Officer

The Chair gave welcome and introductions.

51. **Apologies**

Apologies were received from Councillor Ditta and Councillor S. Hussain.

52. **Substitutions**

Councillor T. Jukes substituted on behalf of Councillor S. Hussain.

53. **Declarations of Interest and Party Whip**

There were no declarations of interest or party whip.

54. **Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)**

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

55. **Minutes**

A copy of the Minutes of the meeting held on the 11 January 2024 were submitted [annexed].

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 11 January 2024 a copy having previously been circulated, be approved, and signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record.

56. **Post-16-provision**

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report, and the Post-16 and Alternative Provision Manager highlighted the salient points (annexed). The report provided an overview of the post-16 provision in Walsall and the work of the Post-16 Strategy Group. The main aims of the Group were described - the current priorities of the Group included a focus on the development of a survey to capture the views of year 11 students. This would assist in identifying gaps in provision and further support young people felt they would need. It was noted that a SEND version of the survey would also be produced. The Group would map Walsall's post-16 offer and work with all providers and the SEND team to ensure that young people had successful transitions into post-16 placements.

In response to questions from Members, Officers confirmed that the information and data from the student survey would be ready in September 2024. Members challenged if there were questions within the survey around the career's advice provided by schools, to ensure that students were aware of all post-16 provision in Walsall, Officers confirmed that this was the case. The Director stated that if schools were not fulfilling their statutory

responsibilities in relation to post-16 provision, the Council could use the 'schools' causing concern protocol' to provide additional support. The Employment and Skills Manager clarified that as part of the contract with Prospects Careers Service the destination of students was tracked, to ensure that they were progressing into positive destinations. Another contract was held with the Careers Enterprise Company which monitored if schools were delivering and providing high quality advice and guidance. It was noted that often secondary schools appointed their own careers leaders and did not use Local Authority provision.

A discussion was held around T-levels, and their availability in Walsall. It was noted it was important that there was a mixture of provision both academic and vocational.

A Member challenged how SEND students were supported, the Director stated that the pathway for young people with SEND was the same as for any other child and the support that they may need would be part of their education. The number of children with SEND who were 'Not in Education, Employment or Training' (NEET) was a focus for the service, and Members agreed that it would be beneficial to receive this as a future agenda item.

The Head of Inclusion provided information on the preparation for adulthood, clarifying that EHCP's focused on independence and aspirations for adulthood from 14 years upwards.

It was agreed that Key stage 5 validated data would be circulated outside of the meeting. Challenge was provided to determine the process if providers were not performing well, Officers provided assurance that where there were concerns around school's support was provided to ensure that standards were met however this was not common. It was reiterated that this would be dealt with through the schools causing concern protocol.

Resolved

- 1. That the post-16 provision report be noted.**
- 2. That a report on children with SEND who are NEET is considered at a future meeting.**
- 3. That Key Stage 5 validated data (full year) is circulated outside of the meeting.**

57. Post-16 Employment and Skills Service and Strategy

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report, and the Post-16 and Employment and Skills Manager highlighted the salient points (annexed). It was noted that all young people in England were required to be in education or training until their 18th birthday and Local Authorities had a statutory duty to assist, encourage, support, and enable young people aged 13-19 to participate in education or training.

The Committee was provided with data on those Not in Education, Employment and Training (NEET), including the impact of the pandemic. In Walsall (November 2023) there were 2,060 young people classed as NEET and this was higher than the regional average. It was noted that where Young People were from disadvantaged backgrounds this number increased.

Members were informed that the Employment and Skills Service's role was to ensure that Walsall residents aged 16 years and over had the opportunity to reach their full potential. Support was provided through careers information and advice to help improve current skills levels and better connect people to the labour market.

The Walsall Works programme was described to Members – its purpose was to support individuals who were economically inactive and supported local people to find jobs, apprenticeships, and access training. It also supported local businesses looking to expand their workforce. The success of this programme was stressed, achieving 665 positive outcomes for participants during 2023, of which 83 were for young people aged 16-18, it also offered support to NEET young people.

Members expressed concern at the number of young people who were NEET and the consequences for them. The success of Walsall Works was acknowledged. A Member queried the demographic breakdown of the young people who were NEET, Officers agreed to circulate this outside of the meeting.

The Committee was informed that the Black Country Impact programme terminated on 31 July 2023 which had created some challenges in relation to long-term funding. However, Shared Prosperity grant funding had been secured, as part of the work related to this there would be a focus on the reduction of NEETS aged 16-19 years.

The Portfolio Holder provided details of the 'Link' multi-service drop in facility where residents could access guidance and information across a wide range of pathways to access employment. This was located on Park Street in Walsall, encouraging Members to visit.

Resolved

- 1. That the Post-16 Employment and Skills Service and Strategy report be noted.**
- 2. A report updating the Committee be considered in the future.**

58. Alternative Provision

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report, and the Post-16 and Alternative Provision Manager highlighted the salient points (annexed). Alternative provision was described as educational settings for children who were not able to attend mainstream school and therefore needed a specialist place. which could be needed for behavioural or medical reasons. In Walsall there

were two Pupil Referral Units, and a wide range of alternative provisions were commissioned to meet the needs of children.

The Committee was provided with information in relation to the robust Quality Assurance processes for alternative provision, and Members were assured that the service worked with providers to ensure that they were operating to best practice and that there were robust safeguarding procedures in place. It was noted that Alternative Providers were receptive to this process.

Officers provided detail to the Committee on the 12-month development strategy for supporting pupils within Alternative Provision. This included building on relationships with alternative providers, robust impact measurement (including gathering the child's voice) and a focus on continual improvement culture.

In response to questions from the Committee, Officers confirmed that not all providers on the framework were based in Walsall, and how students travelled safely to those providers was considered. The main aim of the service was to give access to good quality provision based in Walsall and work was underway to identify gaps in this.

A series of questions ensued, and Officers confirmed that SEND support at alternative provision settings was a key focus of the Local Area Inclusion Board, work had started with New Leaf to consider provision and the needs of children, this model would be built upon and rolled out to other providers. A Member requested an update on this at a future meeting.

Resolved

- 1. That the Alternative Provision report be noted.**
- 2. That an update on SEND support at alternative provision be provided to a future meeting.**

59. Attendance Report

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report, and the Head of Access highlighted the salient points (annexed). The report provided an update of school attendance data in Walsall and advised how Walsall continued to meet its statutory responsibilities to improve school attendance. Members were advised that it was a legal responsibility of parents to ensure that children attended school/received an education. The Committee was advised that academic years were made up of three terms, autumn, spring, and summer with publication of data and key absence measures described.

The Committee was informed that the Department for Education monitored pupil absence levels using two key measures which were the overall absence rate and persistent absent rate. These measures were calculated for pupils of compulsory school age. Indicative local data collection for the Autumn term

2023/24 indicated an improvement in overall school attendance and reduced absence compared to data for 2022/23.

Officers stated that the phrase 'avoidable absence' was new terminology introduced by the Department of Education, and this was important in Walsall as data suggested that 'unauthorised absence' needed to be a focus. Officers confirmed that they would circulate attendance data for the academic year in comparison to statistical neighbours.

The Committee asked Officers what advice was being given in relation to attendance fines. The Head of Access stated that the decision to pursue prosecution for absence lay with the Head Teacher, however the team considered all factors within each case.

Challenge was provided in relation to data, noting that in comparison to the rest of the country, there had been less improvement in Walsall. It was questioned what was being done to understand this. The Head of Access assured the Committee that the service was working with the highest performing statistical neighbours to learn from best practice in relation to this and how this could be translated to Walsall.

A Member questioned how many Walsall schools had joined the attendance hubs, Officers confirmed that this information could be circulated outside of the meeting. The importance of raising aspirations of young people was discussed, including the role of private employers and what they can offer within schools. It was stressed that young people also needed support to have confidence and knowledge to achieve such aspirations.

Resolved

- 1. That the attendance report be noted.**
- 2. That the following information be circulated:**
 - a. attendance data for the academic year in comparison to statistical neighbours.**
 - b. how many Walsall schools had signed up to join the attendance hubs.**

60. Recommendation Tracker

The Committee received the tracker of recommendations from previous meetings, including progress made and outstanding items.

[Annexed]

Resolved:

That the recommendation tracker be noted.

61. Areas of Focus

Resolved that:

The Areas of Focus be noted.

62. **Date of next meeting**

The date of the next meeting is scheduled for 26 March 2024.

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 19:16.

Signed:

Date: