

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

**Tuesday, 21 November at 6 PM**

## **Committee Members present:**

Councillor S. Ditta (Chair)  
Councillor P. Kaur (Vice Chair)  
Councillor T. Jukes  
Councillor N. Latham  
Councillor C. Towe  
Councillor P. Gill  
Councillor L. Rattigan

K. Hinton  
W. Duffus

## **Portfolio Holder:**

Councillor M. Statham – Education

## **Officers Present:**

S. Kelly – Director (Access and Inclusion)  
T. Collier – Finance Manager  
J. Nash – Head of SEND  
R. Thomas – Head of Access  
L. Thompson – Head of Virtual School  
N. Gough – Democratic Services Officer

25. **Apologies**

Apologies were received from Councillors S. Hussain and I. Hussain.

26. **Substitutions**

Councillor T. Jukes substituted for Councillor S.B. Hussain.

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

There were no declarations of interest or party whip.

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

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

29. **Minutes**

A copy of the Minutes of the meeting held on the 3 October 2023 were submitted [annexed].

**Resolved:**

**That the minutes of the meeting held on 3 October 2023 a copy having previously been circulated, be approved and signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record.**

30. **Corporate Financial Performance – Quarter 2 Financial Monitoring Position for 2023/23**

The Finance Manager presented the report and highlighted the salient points (annexed). The Committee was informed that the report summarised the forecast revenue and capital financial position for 2023/24.

The forecast revenue outturn for 2023/24 for the services under the remit of the Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee was an overspend of £0.83m after the net use of reserves of £0.08m.

In response to a query from a Member, the Director (Access and Inclusion) described the demand on educational psychologists; a business case had been completed for the recruitment of extra staff - this included the use of apprentices and trainees. It was noted that there was a national shortage of educational psychologists, which had resulted in the use of agency staff at an elevated cost. To improve recruitment levels there was a need to make Walsall an attractive place to work - a review had taken place of the pay and of the work of educational psychologists. It was anticipated that a further 12.8

educational psychologists would be recruited, and modelling had taken place to ensure future needs were met and budgeted for.

In response to questions in relation to the home school transport service, the Portfolio Holder stated that the service was demand regulated and although numbers were forecast, demand had been higher than expected, however not everyone who was eligible used the service. The Head of Access stated that the service delivered independent travel training for students and the provision of a personal travel budget, this was alongside supporting young people to attend a local school.

Officers confirmed that the underutilisation of the use of grants did not have a negative impact on the service. Members were informed that agreement for delegation of grants had been agreed, and this had allowed further work to be completed with schools.

### **Resolved**

That the Committee note the revenue and capital forecast for the financial year end 2023/24 for the services under the remit of the committee.

## **31. Draft Revenue Budget and Draft Capital Programme 2024/25 – 2027/28**

The Portfolio Holder (Education and Skills) introduced the report to the Committee, and the Finance Planning Manager presented further detail of the proposals. Members considered the budget proposals presented and sought further information and assurances on a number of the proposals contained within the draft revenue budget and draft capital programme 2024/25 – 2027/28.

In response to a question, the Portfolio Holder clarified that any further savings proposals would not be divided equally amongst service areas but would be based on the demand to and needs of the service. Further challenge was provided in relation to staffing costs, and the reasons why this figure was different for each year. The Director (Access and Inclusion) stated that the figures were set according to demand which were profiled and modelled for each year accordingly.

Clarification was provided by Officers in relation to the capital investment in school buildings, the Committee was informed that this investment was aimed at maintaining the school estate and was based on the school estate survey.

### **Resolved**

1. The Committee considered and noted the draft revenue budget proposals 2024/25 – 2027/28 to date that related to the remit of the Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

2. The Committee considered and noted the draft capital schemes 2024/25 – 2027/28 included in the draft capital programme that relate to the remit of the Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
3. The Committee noted that the revenue budget for 2024/25 is currently not balanced, with a gap of c£18m, and requested that a further report be considered by the Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee if there any significant changes to draft proposals outlined relating to services within the committee's remit.

### 32. **Specialist Provision Plan and SEN school places**

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report (annexed) and highlighted links to the budget proposals. The Head of Access provided an overview of the current position of Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) specialist provision within the Local Authority. A five-year plan had been created to ensure that statutory responsibility for having sufficient school places was met.

The Committee was informed that significant work had taken place to review the additional specialist places needed for the next 3-5 years. Significant additional capacity was being made available at special schools and mainstream schools with resourced provision.

Members were advised that several mainstream schools had agreed to provide a specialist resource provision, and this would create 72 additional places, there were also other potential developments which would create an additional 50 places.

In response to challenge, the Head of Access stated that ideally SEN would be provided in each locality, and this was part of the modelling – although there was a limit on how many places a school could support. Further questions were asked in relation to the funding and training arrangements for staff within the specialist resource provision. The Committee was advised that service level agreements were in place with these schools, who were funded a set rate. There was an expectation that teaching staff were SEND trained by specialist staff.

Officers were asked if the impact of the specialist provision could be described, the Director stressed that the provision of these places was new, however the biggest quality assurance measure was Ofsted inspections and initial indications had been extremely positive. There had been a focus on disproportionality of exclusions, especially in relation to children with SEN and EHCPs, and evidence was suggesting that there has been a decrease in the primary sector compared to national statistics. Informal feedback was positive and suggested it was working well.

Members were informed that private providers were Ofsted regulated and monitored through commissioning and quality assurance arrangements.

Further questions were asked, the Head of Access stated that the specialist provision was intended to provide for a range of complex needs and a combination of needs. The Director added that the provision was strategically planned according to the needs of the children. The Portfolio Holder stated that the intention was to provide high quality provision, which were inclusive within communities.

## **Resolution**

**That the Specialist Provision Plan and SEN School Places report be noted.**

### **33. Mainstream School Pupil Place Planning**

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report, and the Head of Access highlighted the salient points (annexed), including school place planning and free school development.

The Committee was advised that the Council had a statutory duty to ensure that there were sufficient school places for resident children who needed a school place. To meet this duty the Council had to understand the changes in the population to ensure sufficient capacity was provided.

Members were informed that continued falling birth rates suggested that there would be a 13% surplus in primary school places across the Borough, this may mean that discussions with schools would need to take place, to consider reducing published admission numbers so that schools did not become financially unsustainable. It was stressed that this would only happen where appropriate, as part of a strategic conversation, and that there would be no school closures. A report would be taken to Cabinet in 2026/27. The Director stated that although there may a reduction in PAN, there was an opportunity to support the SEND need and enable specialist resource provision.

Further information was provided on secondary school placement sufficiency, Members were informed that there was a forecasted shortfall of 308 year 7 places against the schools published admission numbers for September 2024. Nine schools had offered an additional 199 places without requiring any works to be undertaken and two additional schools were in the process of having works completed to create a further 110 places.

Members welcomed cooperation from secondary schools but questioned the cost of such a scheme. It was clarified that if there were capital amendments the Local Authority would receive funding for all pupil growth. The Director agreed that quality assurance was important and informed Members that only those schools that were rated good or outstanding by Ofsted would be invited to take part (or if required improvement are on the trajectory to improve).

## **Resolved**

That the Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- Noted falling birth rates impact on surplus places in primary schools, which will mean a requirement for conversations with schools about possibly reducing their Published Admission Number, or alternatives, to ensure a school does not become financially unsustainable.
- Request a further report on primary places in Spring or Summer term.
- Notes the positive working to meet the forecasted demand for places with secondary schools.

#### 34. **School Admissions Update**

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report, and the Head of Access highlighted the salient points (annexed). The report provided an update on the school admissions activities undertaken by the Admissions and Education Sufficiency Team.

The Committee was informed that the Council worked in conjunction with its neighbouring local authorities to co-ordinate the phased admissions rounds – the application process was explained. A discussion was held around the number of preferences expressed and requirements in relation to this.

A series of questions ensued; Officers explained that the request for a specialist school place took place as part of the EHCP process. Members were informed that the admissions team visited the community to raise awareness and provide assistance in relation to the admission process.

Members commended the work of the School Admissions Team and acknowledged the challenges it faced.

#### **Resolved**

That the Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee

- Notes the School Admissions Update report.
- Notes that all children who submitted an on-time application to Walsall for a secondary place in 2023 were made an offer of a school place even though the demand had also increased.

#### 35. **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.

36. **Areas of Focus**

**Resolved that:**

The Areas of Focus be noted.

37. **Date of next meeting**

The date of the next meeting is scheduled for 11 January 2024.

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 19:10.

Signed:

Date: