

EDUCATION OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

14 FEBRUARY 2019 AT 6.00 PM AT THE COUNCIL HOUSE, WALSALL

- Committee Members present:** Councillor Aftab Nawaz (Chair)
Councillor Daniel Barker
Councillor Carl Creaney
Councillor Brian Douglas-Maul
Councillor Amers Kudhail
Councillor Lorna Rattigan
Councillor Mark Statham
Councillor Vera Waters
- Portfolio Holders present:** Councillor Chris Towe – Education & Skills
- Non-elected voting Members present:** Mrs Teresa Tunnell (Parent Governor)
- Non-elected non-voting Members present:** Mr Russ Bragger (Primary Teacher Representative)
- Officers present:** Ms Sally Rowe, Executive Director - Children's Services
Ms Anne Birch, Interim Assistant Director - Access & Achievement
Ms Connie Beirne, Head of Service - Education Standards & Improvement
Ms Tanya Collier, Senior Accountancy Officer
Ms Alex Groom, School Organisation Manager - Admissions & Pupil Place Planning Team
Ms Kerry Wootton, Post 16 Lead – Children's Services
Dr Paul Fantom, Democratic Services Officer

13/19 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillor Sarah Jane Cooper and Ms Wendy Duffus.

14/19 SUBSTITUTIONS

There were no substitutions.

15/19 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

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

16/19 LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985 (AS AMENDED)

There were no agenda items that required the exclusion of the public.

17/19 MINUTES

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 10 January 2019, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record, subject to the amendment of Minute 9/19, where the second paragraph on page 12 should read ‘...schools had been closed to admission and parents were increasingly frustrated...’.

18/19 STATEMENT ON THE JANE LANE SCHOOL

The Chair invited the Assistant Director - Access & Achievement, Ms Anne Birch, to provide the Committee with a verbal statement concerning the Jane Lane School.

Ms Birch confirmed that the school had been closed to pupils on 4 February 2019, on the grounds of health and safety because of concerns regarding levels of staffing and the safety and wellbeing of pupils, and would remain closed until there was confidence that the safety and wellbeing of pupils could be assured. The Ofsted inspection report had been published on 7 February 2019 and it was stated that this gave the context of the challenges being faced by the school.

Furthermore, Ms Birch advised that parents had been notified of the decision and that two meetings had been held with parents, who had received an explanation of the Ofsted inspection report and what it meant for the school. This included actions being taken, the appointment of an interim executive board and the arrangements for the re-opening of the school. On the latter point, re-opening was to be phased, commencing on 27 February 2019 with year 11 pupils, and then each subsequent day until all secondary school age pupils have returned. In relation to the children of primary school age, alternative arrangements were being made and support was being provided by colleagues in mainstream and specialist provision. It was noted that all parents of primary age children had been consulted on the most appropriate temporary placement, and that similar consultations were held with parents whose children were in the sixth form.

A full report would be made to the next meeting of the Committee on 26 March 2019.

19/19 STATEMENT ON HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT FOR SERVICE USERS POST-16 YEARS OF AGE

The Chair noted that the Cabinet had considered this matter at its meeting held on 13 February 2019 and he invited the Portfolio Holder - Education & Skills, Councillor Chris Towe, to update the Committee on the decision reached by the Cabinet.

Councillor Towe informed the Committee that the proposal to cease post-16 transport for students with special educational needs and disabilities had been subject to a six week consultation period that concluded on 21 December 2018. In excess of 3,000 responses had been received during this time and the overwhelming view expressed was for the Council not to proceed with this saving. Councillor Towe advised that meaningful discussions had been held, with these views being taken on board, and that the Cabinet had agreed not to proceed with this budget saving in 2019/20. The Cabinet had also felt that an examination should be undertaken of what help might be made available to these children and young people to enable them to become more independent, where there was the opportunity to do so.

20/19 CORPORATE FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE – QUARTER 4 FINANCIAL MONITORING POSITION FOR 2018/19

The Committee considered a report [annexed] on the corporate financial performance and the forecast financial position for 2018/19 for services within its area of responsibility.

The Senior Accountancy Officer, Ms Tanya Collier, reported that the forecast overspend for services related to this portfolio prior to any mitigating action and use of reserves was £1.059m. With reference to the corporate and earmarked reserves being used to fund specific items (£0.179m) and implementation of the Directorate's action plan (£0.552m), the net forecast position was reduced to an overspend of £0.328m.

Further to a question from a Member, and with reference to table 6, it was confirmed that the costs of £0.250m, which it was stated may arise and which cannot be capitalised, related to the funding of the school expansion programme.

A Member sought clarification of the agency costs, as detailed in table 2, and whether this was due to staff absence or increasing capacity, and it was confirmed that there was a mixture of these to ensure appropriate cover for posts that needed to be covered due to, for example, the increased demand for SEN assessments.

The Chair, in noting that whilst there were now separate Committees for Children's Services and for Education, and two Portfolio Holders, the Directorate itself remained a single entity, enquired what the over/under spend position was for the entire Directorate? In response, the Executive Director - Children's Services, Ms Sally Rowe, confirmed that at the end of the Quarter the Directorate overspend was £0.328m.

In response to a question from a Member regarding the overspend position in relation to the actual budget in gross terms, it was noted that this information could be included in the future Corporate Financial Performance reports presented to the Committee.

Resolved:

1. That the revenue and capital forecast for the 2018/19 year-end financial position for services under the remit of the Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee be noted;
2. That the actions taken to address the areas of overspend be noted.

21/19 THE SCHOOLS ADMISSIONS PROCESS

With reference to Minute No. 9/19, the Committee considered a report [annexed] that provided information on the Council's statutory responsibilities in respect of the school admissions process and co-ordination with other West Midlands local authorities. Further to the concerns about the process that were raised at the last meeting, and in accordance with the instructions of the Committee, it was also noted that a letter from the Chair to the Local Government Association that outlined these had also been despatched.

In response to a question from a Member concerning the difficulties faced by some parents in obtaining school places for their children, the School Organisation Manager - Admissions & Pupil Place Planning Team, Ms Alex Groom, noted that a number of the constraints were statutorily imposed. This included, for example, infant class size legislation which affected classes in Reception and years one and two. It was also pointed out that there were permitted exceptions to this, where the Council could ensure admission, for example, where either parent was a member of the armed forces, and also that redress could be sought by parents via the school admissions appeals process with independent panels appointed to hear appeals.

A discussion took place regarding whether any further steps could be taken by the Council and if other local authorities experienced similar difficulties. The Chair stated that to lobby for change all elected Members were able to contact their local Member of Parliament, and it was reiterated that a letter had been sent to the LGA. Ms Rowe also pointed out that the legislation was long-standing and had been introduced due to the demands from parents seeking greater choice for where their children were to be educated. However, and particularly in the case of academies, the Council's ability to influence this was limited in scope.

Further to a question on the support provided to parents, Ms Groom emphasised to the Committee that the Admissions Team always sought to place children in the schools closest to their parents' home address. In terms of mid-term movement and changed preferences, she confirmed that due to altered circumstances some parents might also decide that another school was preferable. Ms Groom added that there were two members of staff within the Admissions Team whose role was to facilitate this and to work with parents to assist them with the appeals process.

Further to the earlier discussion relating to the school admission appeals process, the Democratic Services Officer, Dr Paul Fantom, advised the Committee that the arrangement of the hearings was a function undertaken by the Democratic Services Team. He highlighted the independence of the appeals panels, whose members were unpaid volunteers, with at least one member having a background in education, and who were highly committed to seeking the best outcome for the parties via a rigorous decision-making process.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

22/19 INFORMATION, ADVICE AND GUIDANCE

The Committee considered a report [annexed] on the provision of information, advice and guidance (IAG) services in Walsall that gave an overview of the services, the challenges they face and the issues being dealt with.

The Portfolio Holder, Councillor Chris Towe, informed the Committee that IAG, which had not been done well in schools previously, was receiving serious consideration by Ofsted. He related that during an earlier period as a Cabinet Member, he had talked to a number of groups of year 10 pupils about their future career aspirations and had been disappointed by their level of disengagement. This had led him to conclude that IAG activity was not being carried out well by schools and, therefore, the new changes were important. He noted that Ofsted would be looking more closely at children aged between 12 and 18 years of age and would be closely monitoring the groups of local organisations and people involved in IAG provision.

In response to a question from the Chair regarding what influence the Council has over the schools in the Borough to ensure that there is an adequate IAG service, the Post 16 Lead - Children's Services, Ms Kerry Wootton, stressed the importance of negotiation with partners, especially through the Walsall Association of Careers Professionals (which includes all of the IAG staff employed in schools). She added that this Association meets regularly and that due to the opportunity these meetings offered to influence, some of the Council's staff are also in attendance.

Councillor Towe related his disappointment that not enough time was being given to IAG by the schools and that this had been raised at the Association's last meeting as a matter to be raised with head teachers and chairs of school governing bodies.

The Chair commented that there was a tendency for pupils to be seen by institutions in terms of their monetary value, with them being encouraged to focus on academic studies when a vocational route might be more appropriate for them, and enquired what other sources of advice might be available for parents. Ms Wootton stated that whilst there was a national careers service, the majority of support was delivered in school settings. It was noted that with the new inspection framework, Ofsted would be monitoring how well this was implemented by the schools.

In pointing out that many schools were already doing considerable work in relation to IAG, Ms Rowe referred to an event recently organised by the Mercian Trust that she had attended with Ms Wootton and at which there had been examples of good practice. These included working with local businesses, and teaching staff being trained so that relevant advice could be offered to children and young people on the range of careers opportunities open to them in particular fields. Ms Wootton made reference to the Careers Enterprise Company (CEC) and reported that all schools had access via the Company to additional support for their children and young people.

Further to a question from a Member on the number of schools having IAG advisers, Ms Wootton confirmed that all schools in the Borough had IAG advisers and that under the new careers strategy each school was required to place on its website information regarding its careers leader, i.e. the senior staff member having responsibility for careers across the whole curriculum. In relation to the information

received from the schools-based IAG advisers, it was noted that as the majority of Walsall's secondary schools were now academies, this information tended to be obtained via the meetings of the Walsall Association of Careers Professionals.

In response to a Member's question on how the Council audited compliance with the Education Act in regard to IAG and its impact, the Committee was informed that this was achieved partly through the CEC, which received funding for the work that was previously done by local authorities. Ms Wootton added that at a recent meeting, an HMI Inspector had explained the new Ofsted framework in terms of obligations and responsibilities, and it was planned to disseminate this presentation to head teachers and to the Association.

The Committee recognised that due to 'academisation', the local authority's ability to exercise control had been curtailed considerably. Ms Rowe noted that there had been funding through the former Connexions Service but that this ended when the service closed. Moreover, each time a school has assumed academy status there has been a financial impact on the Council as the resources required to track the impact regarding IAG are no longer available. Therefore, use was being made of networks to try to achieve this but the effectiveness of this has been limited.

A Member confirmed that Walsall College was offering taster days for prospective students to drop in and gain some insight into what particular course would entail. It was also noted that the College's provision, which ranged from A Level up to and including degree programmes, now featured the new technical T Level qualifications.

The importance of IAG was emphasised by a Member, who made reference to the motivational impact it could have on children and young people. He noted that prior to 2010, more IAG had been undertaken by local authorities and that it was difficult for them to now have the same impact that they had enjoyed previously.

Regarding the number of vacancies and opportunities in different fields of employment, and whether this information was being widely made available to the Borough's young people, Councillor Towe advised that this was available locally through Walsall Works. Ms Wootton added that CEC had an enterprise adviser who worked with and produced market information relevant to each secondary school.

The Chair stated that since many elected Members were also school governors, they could assist in this capacity by ensuring that schools were taking IAG seriously and raising awareness of such local authority initiatives as the Impact Programme and by inviting schools to liaise with the Council's officers.

There was a reference by a Member to the issue of young people with complex needs and disabilities, for whom the options were limited, and that quite a significant number of this group of young people went into adult social care rather than receiving further or higher education or gaining employment. Councillor Towe reminded the Committee that the statutory duty in respect of these young people now extended to 25 years of age. Ms Wootton advised that the Council was working with training providers with a view to developing programmes and placements to be able to meet the needs of these young people.

In response to a question on how Walsall's IAG provision compared with other local authority areas, it was noted by Ms Wootton that there were a variety of approaches for tackling such key issues as seeking to reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). Councillor Towe informed the Committee that since its establishment in 2010, Walsall Works had continued to make a very positive impact in this regard.

A Member enquired whether leaflets concerning the IAG services could be sent to parents but was advised that responsibility had been delegated to schools, and also there was a considerable amount of information available on the internet. The Chair also noted the importance of parents and young people having the right amount of advice and information to enable them to pursue their chosen career paths.

Resolved:

1. That the report be noted;
2. That an item on the future planning for IAG services following the conclusion of the Impact Project in 2021 be added to the Committee's work programme for the 2019/2020 municipal year.

23/19 WORK PROGRAMME 2018/19 AND FORWARD PLANS

Members considered the Work Programme and the Forward Plans of the Council and the Black Country Executive Joint Committee [annexed].

The Committee noted that it was expected that the Ofsted inspection report on Special Educational Needs and Disabilities would be available for consideration early in the 2019/2020 municipal year.

Resolved:

That the revised Work Programme and the Forward Plans be noted.

24/18 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting was 26 March 2019.

The meeting terminated at 7.15 pm.

Chair.....

Date.....