

**MINUTES OF THE EDUCATION OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE,
COUNCIL CHAMBER, WALSALL COUNCIL HOUSE.**

Tuesday 28 November 2022 at 6.00 P.M.

Committee Members present:

Councillor S. Ditta (Chair)
Councillor B. Bains
Councillor R. Burley
Councillor S. Cheema
Councillor P. Kaur
Councillor L. Rattigan

Portfolio Holder:

Councillor Mark Statham – Education and Skills

Officers Present:

Sharon Kelly - Director Access and Inclusion
Rob Thomas - Head of Access
Thomas Newman – Finance Business Partner for Children Services
Jack Thompson – Democratic Services Officer

Welcome and introductions were made.

32/22 Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors: Towe, A. Hussain, S.B. Hussain, I. Hussain. Apologies were also received from the Co-opted member Sharon Guy.

33/22 Substitutions

There were no substitutions for the duration of the meeting.

34/22 Declarations of Interest and Party Whip

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

35/22 Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)

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

36/22 Minutes

A copy of the Minutes of the meeting held on the 11 October 2022 was submitted [annexed].

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 11 October 2022, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved and signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record.

37/22 School Place Planning for Early Years Sufficiency, Primary, Secondary, Post 16 and Special Schools.

The Portfolio Holder for Education and Skills updated the Committee on the Boroughs position in regard to school places. He highlighted that the majority of childcare providers, such as nurseries, were returning to pre-pandemic levels. There was an expected decrease in demand for primary school places. Plans had been made to accommodate 150 new secondary school places from September 2023. Due to increased demand the Council was currently remodelling the way it predicted the amount of special school places required. Moreover, there had been 6.3 percent increase in statutory assessments and therefore the Borough would need more places and a capital case would be made for further funding for Special Educational Needs (SEN) school places.

The Head of Access added that the Council had a statutory duty to provide mainstream and SEN places within the Borough. The Council completed assessments to predict demand for school places in mainstream schools and was aiming to produce the same information for SEN places by 2023. Up to 90% of early years places had been taken up and due to low birth rates, there had been a decrease in the amount of demand for primary school places. The Council was preparing to reduce the number of places in primary school in a sustainable way. Finally, he added that any increase in the amount of SEN school places would be modelled on the increase in the amount of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and using data from the latest census.

A discussion took place around the amount of school places offered in the Borough and the effect additional places in schools which were already full would have on pupils' education. The Head of Access informed the Committee that those schools accepting additional children which were already at capacity but could not take any more pupils due to a lack of space. The Council had agreed more places with schools but would be provided with capital funding to support more places such as additional classroom space. Furthermore, every pupil was entitled to funding from national government and that schools taking on more pupils would have an increased budget enabling them to hire more staff.

A Member asked for an update on the proposed free school in the Borough. The Head of Access responded that the Council, Department for Education and the school proposer were carrying out a site proposal and curriculum exercise. The free school was planned to open in 2025 but the Council was requesting it to open for Year 7 pupils in September 2024. Additional due diligence work was required before proceeding.

A Member asked if the Council was working to place specialist staff for SEN children within mainstream schools instead of creating new special school places. The Head of Access responded that Council was taking an approach that would aim to see pupils with SEN needs remain in mainstream schools and the Council was working with schools to achieve this. The Council had employed two head teachers on part time contracts to help deliver specialist staff for schools, however, the Council would still need to develop further special school places.

A Member asked if the expansion of T-Levels would put pressure on sixth forms within the Borough. The Director for Access and Inclusion responded that there was a national push for these qualifications but there was increased pressure on sixth forms within the Borough regardless. The sixth forms within the Borough would need to work together to pull resources and use multiple sites to help meet the needs of pupils. The Chair added that T-Levels did not put further pressure on schools, but the aim was that these qualifications would overtake apprenticeships and offer an alternative route for pupils into university but also provide work experience at the same time.

A discussion took places around how the Council took into account pupils travelling into the Borough to attend school. The Head of Access informed the Committee that the model the Council used did take into account pupils travelling into the Borough to attend school and that there had been an increase in the number of children doing this in recent years. Furthermore, the Council had to abide by the admissions policy. The Director for Access and Inclusion added that parents could express a preference and not a choice and that the Council had a legal responsibility to provide a suitable school place. It was therefore in parents' best interest to make as many preference choices as possible when applying. Officers agreed that the Committee would be provided with the number of children traveling into the Borough for school outside of the meeting.

A Member asked if there was a time scale for the creation of the Social Care Internship mentioned in the report. The Director of Access and Inclusion responded that the Council had allocated funding for these internships, however, they were only at the preliminary stages. Officers were happy for this to be a future item for the Committee to consider in March 2023.

A Member asked if any information had been received regarding the SEN free school. The Head of Access responded that further information would be provided by the Department for Education at the end of February 2023.

A Member asked if any forward planning was carried out by the Council when housing developments were approved to ensure adequate of childcare provision. The Head of Access responded that planning for this was done through the Childcare Sufficiency Assessment and that a report on this would be circulated to Members shortly. The report would include the Childcare Sufficiency Assessment and would include information about certain Wards in regard to predicted increases in the demand for childcare due to approved housing development and the amount of childcare provided by the market. It

might be the case that in future the Council would need to support further development of the Childcare market to make sure there were enough places, however, there were currently enough places to meet demand. The Director for Access and Inclusion added that it was a fine balancing act to make sure enough places were available, but the Council would not intervene to make places available to parents on their doorstep. This was due the childcare provides needing financial stability, so some parents would be expected to travel to access childcare.

Resolved:

- That information would be provided to Members of the Committee on the number of children travelling into the Borough for school outside of the meeting.
- That a report on internships would be presented to the Committee at a future meeting.
- That a report on the Childcare Sufficiency Assessment would be presented to the Committee at a future meeting.
- That the Committee considered the content of the report.

38/22 Corporate Financial Performance – Quarter 2 Financial Monitoring Position for 2022/23

The Portfolio Holder for Education and Skills informed the Committee that the directorate had an overspend of £400,000 and had used £180,000 of reserves. This overspend was due to the increase in the requirements for EHCP assessments and the use of agency staff to reduce waiting times. Furthermore, there was a risk of an additional £930,000 overspend due to the potential increase in the amount of funding needed for SEN and the subsequent need to further EHCP provision and Education Psychology Assessments. As service transformation plan for 2022/23 was being implemented and would generate a saving of £680,000. These savings were expected to be delivered by the end of March 2023. The total capital programme for the services under the remit of the Committee was £37.52 million, £18.46 million was expected to be utilised in the financial year 22/23 and remaining £19.06 million carried into the financial year 23/24.

The Finance Business Partner for Children's Services picked out the salient points within the report and explained the overspend in more detail (see annexed). The Director for Access and Inclusion added that the majority of the overspend was due to the use of agency staff with the SEN teams and for EHCPs specifically. The Director for Access and Inclusion also informed Members that by the new year there would be a fully staffed team for EHCPs, consisting of internal secondment and external appointments. These new staff would remove the cost pressure created by agency staff.

A discussion took place around the use of the capital budget and the amount being carried over to the next financial year. The Director for Access and Inclusion informed the Committee that it was not unusual for as some projects

had not been finished and therefore the money had not been spent. Reports on future spending of the capital budget would be brought to the Committee future. The Director for Access and Inclusion added that the use of the capital budget required the right planning and modelling.

A Member asked if the potential overspend around EHCPs included in the report would be factored into the budget setting taking place in January 2023. The Director of Access and Inclusion responded that the Council had modelled the increase in EHCP demand to request additional funding. Furthermore, the Council would keep this under review and had put in a business case for more staffing. The Finance Business Partner for Children's Services added that there had been a request for four more posts, but this had yet to be finalised. The Portfolio Holder for Education and Skills added that ECHPs had been problematic for many councils and that it was good that Walsall Council had met its statutory target.

Resolved:

- That a report on future spending of the capital budget would be presented to the Committee at a future meeting.
- That the Committee note the revenue and capital forecast for the financial year end 2022/23.

39/22 Recommendation Tracker

The Democratic Services Officer updated the Committee on the recommendation tracker.

The Democratic Services Officer informed the Committee that the data on EHCP applications and the Accelerated Access Plan had been shared with Members. The Director for Access and Inclusion took the Members of the Committee through the salient figures contained within data on ECHP applications.

A discussion took place around the increase in the amount of ECHPs being processed by the Council. The Director for Access and Inclusion informed members that there were three main reasons for this increase: the Council was working through the Covid backlog in applications, the was national general increase in applications and that with the return of children back to the classroom more schools were referring children for EHCPs that would have been missed due to home schooling during the pandemic.

A Member asked when the Council expected the amount of EHCP applications to level out. The Director for Access and Inclusion responded that the Council was expecting the growth in ECHPs taper out by March 2023. Furthermore, that the year groups in which EHCP applications were being made was becoming lower each year which meant children with SEN needs were being identified and support was being put in place earlier as a result.

Resolved:

That the Recommendation Tracker be noted.

40/22 Areas of Focus

The Democratic Services Officer informed the Committee of the items on the areas of focus scheduled for the next meeting of the Committee in January 2023.

Following a discussion on the agenda for the next meeting it was agreed to merge two items.

Resolved:

That the items scheduled for the next meeting on 'attainment and improving educational outcomes' and 'increasing the number of good and outstanding schools' be merged.

41/22 Date of next meeting

The date of the next meeting was scheduled for the 12 January 2023.

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 18:48.

Signed:

Date: