

EDUCATION OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 13 January 2022 at 6.00 pm

In the Council Chamber at the Council House, Walsall

Committee Members present: Councillor K. Murphy (Vice-Chair in the Chair)
Councillor H. Bashir (Substitute for Councillor S. Nasreen)
Councillor R. Burley
Councillor S. Elson
Councillor K. Ferguson
Councillor P. Kaur
Councillor E. Lee
Councillor L. Rattigan
Councillor G. Singh Sohal (Substitute for Councillor S. Johal)

Portfolio Holders present: Councillor C. Towe – Education & Skills

Non-elected non-voting Members present: Ms S. Guy – Primary Teacher Representative
Ms W. Duffus – Secondary Teacher Representative

Officers present: Mrs S. Rowe, Executive Director – Children’s Services
Mrs S. Kelly, Director – Access & Inclusion
Mr R. Thomas, Head of Access
Ms J. Nash, Interim Head of SEND
Dr P. Fantom, Democratic Services Officer

1/22 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors S. Ditta, L. Jeavons, S. Johal and S. Nasreen.

2/22 Substitutions

Councillor H. Bashir substituted for Councillor S. Ditta and Councillor G. Singh Sohal substituted for Councillor S. Johal.

3/22 Declarations of interest and party whip

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

4/22 Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)

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

5/22 **Minutes**

A copy of the Minutes of the meeting held on 25 November 2021 was submitted [Annexed].

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 25 November 2021, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved and signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record.

6/22 **Change in the order of business**

The Vice-Chair advised that item 8 would be considered as the next item of business by the Committee.

7/22 **Update on the SEND Local Area Improvement Programme and EHCPs**

The Committee received a report on the SEND Local Area Improvement Programme and Education, Health and Care Plans [Annexed].

The Portfolio Holder, Councillor C. Towe, introduced the report, which updated Members on the Written Statement of Action (WSOA) produced following the February 2019 Ofsted inspection to address areas of weakness in the service. Recently a stock-take had reviewed all of the WSoA's actions, indicating the completion of 149 of 184 actions (81 per cent). Additionally, significant developments in other areas, such as risk assessment for children and young people with EHCPs and the monitoring of activities to ensure children not attending school were safe and well, had been undertaken. A 'head space' programme had been introduced that provided support to education staff – including a 7-day telephone support line for school leaders. It was noted that EHCP timelines continued to be a strong focus for improvement and the report contained an update on the actions being implemented

The Interim Head of SEND, Ms J. Nash, highlighted the key aspects of the report. She noted that two projects were being introduced in relation to EHCPs. The first project, which would run until 1 March 2022, was to ensure the clearance of the statutory assessment backlog and to improve timeliness to 60 per cent. There would also be a focus on those children missing from education and on vulnerable children who might be at risk in order to provide them with appropriate placement provision. The second project, which would run thereafter, would have as its aim the transformation of EHCP pathways by working with schools and parents to improve, co-produce and to design a long-term proficient service centred on the best outcomes for children.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

The Committee received an overview report on schools in the Borough [Annexed].

The Portfolio Holder, Councillor C. Towe, introduced the report, noting that it included the outcomes of the latest Ofsted inspections, which, despite the challenges being faced, had remained positive. The report also set out the projects currently in place for school leaders, with the extensive range of support available being circulated to schools and shown on the Council's website. Also referred to in the report was information concerning the Government's consultation on school improvement, which it was anticipated would have an impact on the role of local authorities from April 2022.

In terms of the latest school attendance data, Councillor Towe reported that these were 92.6 per cent (primary schools), 87.6 per cent (secondary schools), 58.9 per cent (pupil referral units) and 86.5 per cent (special schools). In relation to Covid-19, 37 staff and 151 pupils had recorded positive tests and 22 settings had been affected. The current rate of infection in the Borough was 2,152 cases per 100,000, compared with 919 per 100,000 nationally, and remained significant.

The Director – Access & Inclusion, Mrs S. Kelly, reported that the Government's consultation on school improvement had now closed and the DfE were continuing with the proposal. Accordingly, the Council would consult the Schools Forum in order to continue to support schools by identifying what intervention and support was required. Further reports would be made to the Committee concerning any future developments arising from this.

Having regard to a question from Councillor Kaur concerning the utilisation of the improvement grant, Mrs Kelly advised that the improvement grant currently funded two activities/areas of work. Firstly, within the Council's own services and the maintenance of close relationships with schools via quality assurance and data analysis. Secondly, for the funding of external challenging education consultants, who visit schools to facilitate and support improvement. She advised that discussions were to be undertaken with the Schools Forum around the future use of this funding and the continued provision of activities and support to schools.

Councillor Kaur also enquired what the key highlights from the reviews had been. In response, Mrs Kelly noted the general themes with respect to social and mental health issues. The main strength of the reviews had been that as they were school-based, the focus had been placed on what children and schools required for improvement and a bespoke action plan had been created for each school. She also pointed out that since they had resumed, inspections of Walsall schools by Ofsted had resulted in requiring improvement or good outcomes. Furthermore, two maintained schools that had formerly been rated by Ofsted as inadequate had recently received improved outcomes of requiring improvement and that progress was continuing to be made.

Councillor Towe endorsed these comments, thanked the schools and staff concerned and expressed the hope that the Schools Forum would continue to work with the Authority.

Further to questions from Councillor Bashir regarding the schools rated inadequate or requiring improvement, and whether they were located in particular parts of the Borough, Mrs Kelly explained the way in which the Authority worked with schools and academies to challenge and seek improvement, including through the schools causing concern process and via the provision of additional support. Consequently, this engagement had been positively received by schools and there had been improvement in the outcomes of Ofsted inspections.

In response from an enquiry from Councillor Elson regarding the utilisation and promotion of support programmes, and for those programmes relating to mental health, Mrs Kelly confirmed that two head teachers were currently seconded to the Authority. A directory of information was also available and maintained, and there was a significant number of programmes and other resources for mental health. Mental Health leads received support and training from the NHS and the Authority's Education Psychology Service

With reference to a question from Councillor Kaur on the use of school facilities, Mrs Kelly advised that maintained schools were responsible for their premises and it was a matter for their governing bodies if they wished to lease these out. Noting that many schools provided services during school holidays, Councillor Towe referred to the importance of the Activity Fund, which was open to children eligible to receive free school meals and had now been extended to include children with EHCPs and care leavers. He pointed out that this had funding for another three years and, whilst take up was good in some areas, this was not the case in other parts of the Borough, and he asked Members who were school governors to encourage its take-up for children and young people.

Further to a question concerning the Shadow Board, its composition and operation, Mrs Kelly explained that this Board was comprised of children and young people and had been established in order to shadow and challenge the governance and decision-making of the Walsall Learning Alliance and the SEND Local Area Improvement Board. Accordingly, it worked with the head teacher of the virtual school and the children's champion.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

9/22 Update on School Organisation – Pupil Place Planning

The Committee received an update report on school organisation and pupil place planning in the Borough [Annexed].

The Portfolio Holder, Councillor C. Towe, introduced the report. He noted the Authority's statutory duty for ensuring sufficient school places for resident children who wanted a school place, and a general duty under section 14 of the Education Act 1966 to ensure that there were available in each area sufficient schools (in number, character and equipment) to provide all pupils with the opportunity for an

appropriate education. He noted that there had been a reduction in birth numbers since 2016, resulting in a forecast reduction in the demand for primary school places, which might require schools to reduce their published admission number in future to maintain financial sustainability. However, for secondary schools, it was forecasted that there could be future shortages of places necessitating consideration of options for additional capacity, including school expansion and the possible construction of a new free school. Having regard to SEND, the School Organisation Service was reviewing the number of places and the SEND team was working closely with schools to develop a five-year plan to ensure that there were ample school places for children and young people with SEND.

The Head of Access, Mr R. Thomas, reported on the significant capital resource that been invested to create primary places and the steps to create additional capacity in secondary schools. In relation to specialist places, and the need for in-Borough highly complex needs provision, work was being undertaken with schools and assist with this, two head teachers had been seconded to the Authority.

A question was asked by Councillor Rattigan concerning the financial implications for schools of declining birth rates. In response, Mr Thomas stated that the Authority was meeting with head teachers to discuss the data, forecasts and current admission numbers to ensure that schools were sustainable and had appropriate staffing in future.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

10/22 Work Programme 2021/22

Members received the Committee's updated Work Programme [Annexed].

Resolved:

That subject to the above-mentioned amendments, the Work programme be approved.

11/22 Forward Plans

Members received and considered the Forward Plans of the Council and the Black Country Executive Joint Committee [Annexed].

Resolved:

That the Forward Plans be noted.

12/22 **Date of next meeting**

The next meeting would be held on Thursday, 17 February 2022 at 6.00 pm.

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 6.43 pm.

Chair.....

Date.....