

CITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON COUNCIL	Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel 9 September 2020
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Time 6.00 pm **Public Meeting?** YES **Type of meeting** Scrutiny

Venue Microsoft Teams Meeting

Membership

Chair Cllr Rita Potter (Lab)
Vice-chair Cllr Sohail Khan (Con)

Labour

Cllr Rupinderjit Kaur
 Cllr Beverley Momenabadi
 Cllr Clare Simm
 Cllr Rashpal Kaur
 Cllr John Rowley
 Cllr Paul Sweet
 Cllr Jasbinder Dehar
 Cyril Randles

Conservative

Cllr Udey Singh

Church of England – Diocese of Lichfield
 Representative

Wolverhampton Youth
 Council Representatives

Quorum for this meeting is four Voting Members.

Information for the Public

If you have any queries about this meeting, please contact the Democratic Services team:

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Tel/Email Tel: 01902 551251 or earl.piggott-smith@wolverhampton.gov.uk
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 Wolverhampton WV1 1RL

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Agenda

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

1 Welcome and Introductions

[The Chair to welcome everyone to the meeting. The Scrutiny Officer will then read out a list of those invited to the meeting to confirm who is in attendance.]

2 Meeting procedures to be followed

[The Chair will explain how the meeting will proceed, how questions are to be asked and any matters of meeting etiquette.]

MEETING BUSINESS ITEMS

3 Apologies

4 Declarations of interest

5 Minutes of the previous meeting (22 January 2020) (Pages 3 - 6)

[To approve the minutes of the previous meeting as a correct record]

6 Minutes of the previous meeting (3 February 2020) (Pages 7 - 12)

[To approve the minutes of the previous meeting as a correct record]

7 Matters arising

[To consider any matters arising from the minutes]

DISCUSSION ITEMS

8 Update on the Council's response to the Covid-19 crisis and future plans relating to children and young people (report to follow)

[Emma Bennett, Director of Children's Services, to update the Panel about how the Council has responded to supporting children and young people during the Covid-19 crisis and the impact on future priorities]

9 Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel 2019 20 - Draft Work Programme (report to follow)

[Earl Piggott-Smith, Scrutiny Officer, to present report]

Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel

Appendix Item No: 5

Minutes - 9 March 2020

Attendance

Members of the Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Rita Potter (Chair)
Cllr Udey Singh
Cllr Rashpal Kaur
Cllr Paula Brookfield
Cllr Paul Sweet

In Attendance

Cllr Dr Michael Hardacre

Cabinet Member for Education and Skills

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

1 **Apologies**

Apologies were received from the following members of the panel:

Cllr Sohail Khan
Cllr John Rowley
Cllr Beverley Momenabadi
Cllr Clare Simm

2 **Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest recorded.

3 **All Age Travel Assistance Policy**

Cllr Dr Michael Hardacre, Education and Skills, introduced the report and outlined the background to the drafting of the proposed changes to the current All Age Travel Assistance Policy. The Cabinet Member advised the panel of the main findings from the public consultation and the changes made in response to feedback received. The Cabinet Member explained that the underlying philosophy was to be a 'good parent' and give children and young people the opportunity to become more independent travellers and to learn new life skills. The Cabinet Member accepted that the proposed changes to the policy will take time to implement.

The Cabinet Member referred to the statutory responsibilities of the Council to promote the use of sustainable travel and transport to children and young people of compulsory school age. The Cabinet Member explained the responsibilities of parents to ensure their child receives suitable education and accompanying them to

school was considered to be part of this responsibility. The Cabinet Member advised that an example of the change might be a young person could be issued with a bus pass or collected from a nearby bus stop rather than outside their home.

The Cabinet Member advised the panel that major change to the current policy will be the introduction of charges for young people of sixth form age. The panel were advised that the policy change will be introduced from September 2021 and the schools and colleges will be reminded that they have been funded by Government to provide financial support through bursaries to meet their travel costs in the future.

The Cabinet Member added that the Council has no power to direct schools to do this and it will be a challenge, but it is part of the new approach to encourage and support people to travel independently; while recognising for some pupil that this will not be an option because of their particular disability or illness.

The response to the consultation paper was supportive of the proposed change in policy. The panel were invited to comment on the proposals.

The panel suggested that the proposals listed in para 4.3 of the report should be reorganised in priority and the current proposal 9 should be first priority to reflect the new policy regarding travel assistance. The Cabinet Member accepted the suggestion and agreed to review the list in terms of priority.

The panel queried whether applicants whose current health is such that there would be no realistic expectation that they could become an independent travel would still need to be assessed under the new policy. Emma Bennett, Director of Children's Services, confirmed that each would be assessed as the aim was to offer personalised support. The assessment should be seen as positive opportunity to identify a person's needs and provide appropriate support that will better meet their needs; particularly for people with complex physical and/or behavioural needs.

The panel queried the extent of the choice that people would be offered at the end of the assessment process.

Cabinet Member commented that the current travel arrangements do not offer young people a choice as the Council will determine the most appropriate means of transport. For example, the start of the day for a young person could be 2 hours earlier than other children as the bus pick up service is based on a set route.

The new policy will support the right of young people to travel within their ability. The Cabinet Member reassured the panel that would not be a time limit on when a young person would be considered to be ready for independent travel. The Cabinet Member also advised the panel that the budget is not an issue and that parents were generally supportive of the change policy. This has been supported by the Director and the Leader of the Council.

The panel queried the plans for rolling out the programme. The Director of Children's Services advised the panel that there would be a phased rollout of the scheme as detailed in the report para 6.1.

The panel queried the resource implication of providing resources to manage the increased number of assessments and provide training support. The Director of

Children's Services advised that there would be sufficient resources to meet demand. The panel were advised each case would be assessed when their annual review is due which would make the process more manageable.

The panel queried if a log would be maintained to record any travel incidents following the changes in policy. The Director of Children's Services reassured the panel that the current policy already includes a risk assessment and a process for recording travel incidents. The aim will be to provide a safe travel environment for young people.

The Cabinet Member commented on the need to improve the travel assistance offer and provide a different service to that offered in the 1950s and 60s to young people who have special educational needs and or disabilities. The Cabinet Member gave examples of the benefits of encouraging young with disabilities to be more independent travellers where possible and the importance of breaking the cycle of dependency in preparation for future adult life, where it is appropriate to do so.

The Director of Children's Services commented that assessments for travel assistance take place all year round and at any one time there could be a number of assessments that need to be completed. Reviews are then held annually to review a person's travel needs

The panel discussed the appeal process. The Director of Children's Services explained that decision about recommended travel assistance option would be part of a discussion between the Council and the young person and not simply be imposed.

The Cabinet Member advised the panel that the appeal process would be much clearer and there would opportunities to challenge a decision at different stages. The appeal process would have an independent element at the second stage as detailed in the report and Councillors would no longer be involved in process. This was influenced by consultation feedback.

The Director of Children's Services commented that the Council would work with parents to find a solution if there were concerns following the assessment of the recommended travel assistance option.

The panel welcomed the proposals and the assurances given about how the policy would be implemented.

Resolved:

1. The panel comments on the proposal changes to the All Age Travel Assistance Policy to be considered when the report is presented to Cabinet for approval.
2. The panel welcome the assurances given by the Cabinet Member and Director of Children's Services about the implementation timeline of the policy and support plans for the phased introduction as detailed in the report.

The meeting closed at 18:35

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Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel

Appendix Item No: 6

Minutes - 3 February 2020

Attendance

Members of the Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel

Cyril Randles
Cllr Rita Potter (Chair)
Cllr Clare Simm
Cllr Udey Singh
Cllr Sohail Khan (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Jasbinder Dehar
Cllr Paula Brookfield

Co-opted Members (5)

Wolverhampton Youth Council

In Attendance

Cllr Dr Michael Hardacre Cabinet Member Education and Skills

Employees

Earl Piggott-Smith
Emma Bennett
Richard Welch

Scrutiny Officer
Director of Children's Services
Head of Partnerships and Commercial
Services (Education)
Corporate Parenting Officer

Alice Vickers

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 **Apologies**
Apologies were received from the following members of the panel:

Cllr John Rowley
Cllr Paul Sweet
Cllr Beverley Momenabadi
Cllr Rashpal Kaur
- 2 **Declarations of interest**
There were no declarations of interest recorded.

- 3 **Towers Outdoor Education Centre - Options Appraisal (report to follow)**
Cllr Dr Hardacre, Cabinet Member Education and Skills introduced the report and explained changes in the responsibility for the management of school budgets and the delivery of the outdoor education curriculum. The Cabinet Member advised the panel that schools now have direct control of 97% of their budget. The responsibility for decisions about expenditure on education rests with Headteachers and school governing bodies and not the Local Authority.
- The Council has two places on the Schools' Forum where decisions about budget allocation are made, the majority of other places are held by schools. (The Schools' Forum is a partnership body linking the Local Authority and the school community in making decisions about school funding and roles and responsibilities.)
- The panel were advised that 18 Wolverhampton schools used The Towers during 2018-19. Richard Welch, Head of Partnerships, outlined the results of responses to a consultation survey completed in 2019 and highlighted a key finding that young people would like more community based local provision and activities.
- The Head of Partnerships advised the panel that there are 60 places at the Towers and gave a breakdown of running costs the building. The Head of Partnerships advised that it was originally estimated that completing the repair work would be £800,000 but was reduced to £600,000 following a review. A breakdown of the repair works is available on request.
- The Head of Partnerships briefed the panel on the different options regarding the future of the building and reasons for supporting option 1 (to close the building immediately and then dispose of at auction) as being the best option. The Head of Partnerships briefed the panel on the merits of the Options 2 and 3 detailed in the report.
- The Head of Partnerships advised the panel the Council has received two offers of interest from two organisations. The discussions are at an early stage.
- The panel queried if there was a long list of options prepared for consideration before agreeing the options presented and why the report itself was not presented earlier to the panel. The Head of Partnerships advised the panel of the process used to agree the list of options.
- The panel queried if the report on the plans for Tower Outdoor Education Centre was presented to Audit and Risk Committee and also whether the issue was on Strategic Risk Register. Emma Bennett, Director of Children's Services, advised the panel that the building was not considered to be a priority alongside other Council assets. The Head of Partnerships agreed to make enquiries and advise the panel to confirm the situation.
- The panel queried the historic maintenance arrangements for the Towers and expressed concern about why the issues highlighted had not been raised earlier. The panel commented about the availability of building condition reports for the Towers in previous years. The Head of Partnerships advised that £70,000 had been added to the building maintenance budget for 2019/20 in response to issues highlighted during a review.

The panel queried the findings from the survey of young people and the reasons given for not wanting to use the Towers. The panel queried action taken to promote the site and to consider options such promoting the centre as a venue for weddings etc to increase numbers.

The panel queried the work done to promote the use Towers and commented that the such plans should ideally have started 18 months earlier.

The panel queried the reliability of the estimate given for the cost of repairs. The Head of Partnerships advised that the original estimate for the repairs to the Towers was estimated at £800,000 but following challenge the estimate had reduced to £600,000. The panel added that in response to the report much lower estimates for completing the work had been suggested by members of the public and queried how reliable the figures quoted in the report were. The Head of Partnerships advised that the estimates were a guide but based on information from qualified property professionals.

The panel discussed the alternative options considered and the estimated costs. The Head of Partnerships advised that the Council had been advised by Friends of Towers regarding expressions of interest from Academy Trusts who have suggested alternative options.

The panel queried the level of occupancy needed for the Towers to cover its costs. The Head of Partnerships advised that the issue of occupancy was not the issue.

The panel queried the arrangements used to monitor the condition of the building and expressed concern that the issue had not been identified earlier. The Head of Partnerships advised that the condition of building was highlighted as result of work done arising from discussions about proposal for community asset transfer of the Towers to a social enterprise company. As a result of the inspection in August 2019 the building was closed due to safety concerns. The panel discussed whether the list of repairs could be reprioritised, and the work phased over a period of time.

The panel commented about the impact of that creation of multi-academy trusts on decisions to use outdoor education facilities and whether they could be approached to consider sponsoring the Towers as an alternative to Option 1 in the report. The Director of Children's Services advised that the Council has considered the option of community asset transfer but will also consider the idea of getting sponsorship.

The panel commented on the need to listen to the views of young people who responded to the survey about the services they would like and specifically about the majority wanting more local provision.

The panel were concerned about the financial implications of a delay if either Options 2 and Option 3 were considered.

The panel queried other options for alternative outdoor residential accommodation if the Towers were to be sold. The Cabinet Member responded that the responsibility of schools and governing bodies to decide how they spend their resources to meet the requirements of the curriculum.

The panel asked if consideration had been given to promoting other events at the Towers. The Head of Partnerships advised that given the poor state of the building it would require major capital investment to make it attractive option for a venue for weddings etc. The panel expressed concern that the decision to close the building at short notice and meant that some pupils lost the opportunity to attend this year. The Director of Children's Services acknowledged the difficulties caused by the decision to close Towers at short notice.

The panel queried if the funds from the proposed sale of Towers would be ringfenced for investment into other outdoor education activities. The Cabinet Member advised there was unlikely to any financial return to the Council following any possible sale. The Cabinet Member explained the restrictions on how receipts from the sale of Council owned assets could be used.

The panel expressed concern about the management of the maintenance and refurbishment of the building in the past.

The panel discussed the history of councils owning outdoor provision outside the local authority area and the extent to which this trend is now changing and also the benefits to young people of having the opportunity to use such facilities.

The panel queried the list of options presented and considered that there was not enough information in the report to make an assessment about the preferred option. The panel discussed the preferred option that the Towers should be sold and there were a range of views expressed about the need for provision of more local outdoor educational activities rather than activities based some distance away from Wolverhampton.

The panel queried the cost of booking places at the Towers which was quoted at £300 per student, but other centres offering similar outdoor educational experiences were charging £100 per student. The Head of Partnerships agreed to note this.

The panel discussed ideas for promoting the use of Towers to give children opportunities to experience outdoor education activities and the extent to which schools could be asked to contribute towards the costs of running the centre.

The panel commented that the experience offered by more local venues is very different to that offered by the Towers which is located far from Wolverhampton and the benefit this experience offers young people.

The panel welcomed the report and thanked everyone for their contributions.

Resolved:

1. The panel comments on the report options for future of Towers Outdoor Education Centre to be submitted to Cabinet meeting on 19 February 2020 for further consideration.
2. The Head of Partnerships to send the following information to the panel:
 - a copy of the CIPFA report commissioned by the Council in 2018

- a breakdown of annual running costs of Towers Outdoor Education Centre
- details of estimated costs of building repair work required for Towers to meet health and safety standards
- to provide a response to question about the decision not to include Towers on the Council Strategic Risk Register.

The meeting closed at 19.00

