

# Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel

## 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

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## 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

