

Strong Families, Children, and Young People Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 11 January 2023

Attendance

Members of the Strong Families, Children, and Young People Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Rita Potter (Chair)
Cllr Paul Sweet
Cllr Qaiser Azeem
Cllr Adam Collinge (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Stephanie Haynes
Cllr Lovinyer Daley
Cllr Dr Michael Hardacre
Cllr Carol Hyatt
Cllr Andrew McNeil
Cllr Louise Miles
Cllr Lynne Moran

In attendance

Cllr Burden, Cabinet for Education and Skills

Employees

Earl Piggott-Smith
Emma Bennett
Alison Hinds
James Barlow
Phil Leivers
Darren Martindale
Amanda Sherrard
Brenda Wile

Scrutiny Officer
Executive Director of Families
Deputy Director of Children's Social Care
Finance Business Partner
Head of Education Excellence
Service Manager – Vulnerable Learners
Corporate Analytics Manager
Deputy Director of Education

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1** **Welcome and Introductions**
Cllr Rita Potter, Chair, welcomed everyone to the meeting and advised it was also being live streamed to the press and public.
- 2** **Meeting procedures to be followed**
Cllr Potter explained the process to be followed during the meeting for asking questions.
- 3** **Apologies**
Apologies were received from the following member of the panel:

Cllr Rupinderjit Kaur

4 **Declarations of interest**

The following members of the panel declared a non-pecuniary interest in agenda item 8.

Cllr Dr Michael Hardacre

5 **Minutes of the previous meeting (5 October 2022)**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 5 October 2022, subject to the agreed changes, be approved as a correct record.

The panel agreed the following amendment to minutes – Agenda 7 Youth and holiday offer in the City – page 5

"The holiday programme covered a period of ten weeks which included some of the school holidays. The Council contributed additional funding to cover the remaining weeks."

"During the Christmas and New Year period holiday activities were offered for part of this holiday period in response to parents' comments."

6 **Update from Cross Party Scrutiny Review Group: Written Statement of Action**

The Chair invited Brenda Wile, Deputy Director of Education, to present the report.

The Deputy of Director of Education outlined the background to the Written Statement of Action (WSOA) and to the establishment of the review group to monitor the progress. The Deputy Director of Education gave a summary of the progress against the actions that was presented to members of the Cross-Party Scrutiny Review Group on 13 December 2022.

The Deputy Direction of Education advised the panel that there is an 18-month period set by CQC to achieve the actions in the WSOA.

The Deputy Direction of Education advised the panel that a meeting of the review group was held in December 2022 following a second monitoring visit by the DfE and the Care Quality Commission.

The Deputy Director of Education gave a summary of the information presented to the group which highlighted the good progress being made against the agreed actions. The CQC and DfE outcome letter commented that Wolverhampton partners had demonstrated that there is effective governance co -production and strategic leadership in place to support the delivery of WSOA.

The review group acknowledged the progress made and highlighted the achievements made since the WSOA was produced.

The review group had a specific concern about the delay in introducing a replacement IT system. The Deputy Director of Education advised the working group about the interim arrangements to address the concern until a new IT system is introduced. The feedback from the working group on this issue was included in a report to the SEND Partnership Board for their consideration.

The Deputy Director of Education was confident that the remaining actions will be achieved within the timescale.

The panel were invited to comment on the report.

The panel acknowledged the scale of the work completed and the good progress made to date. The panel commented on the importance to continue engaging with parents about planned changes to the service.

The panel highlighted a concern about the impact of delays in the CAHMS assessment. The Deputy Director of Education advised the panel that the issue of delays was a key focus of the discussion earlier in the day at a meeting of the SEND Partnership Board.

The panel queried the reference to issue of identifying children with SEND needs in the timely manner in primary and secondary schools and the view that the process was too long due to delays in the assessment and wanted further details.

The Deputy Director of Education commented on the ongoing challenges in this area and advised the panel of the plans for improving the service. The Deputy Director of Education acknowledged the need for Council and other partner organisations to get better at identifying young people of school age with SEND needs more quickly and that the issue is due primarily to delays in the CAMHS assessment process.

The panel discussed the different factors contributing to delays in the CAMHS assessment process and suggested that the report should make clear the complexity of the process itself and the differing priorities and resources of schools and the professionals organisation involved.

The Deputy Director of Education accepted the challenges presented the different levels of experience and expertise among SENCOs and in response a support group was set up to provide resources information and guidance free for all schools, rather than as part of an SLA, to improve the quality of practice.

The panel thanked the presenter for the report.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to note the report and welcomed the progress made on the WSOA.

7 Performance, Budget Monitoring and MTFS

The Chair invited Emma Bennett, Executive Director of Families, to introduce the presentation.

The Executive Director advised the panel about the changes to the presentation of budget and performance information into a single report, rather than separately. The aim is to present the information in a way which makes it clear the budget expenditure, the impact on performance of Council services, and the link to specific performance against local and national data sets.

The report focuses on services to children and young people, and highlights information which was previously included in the 2022-2023 Performance and Budget monitoring update – Quarter 2.

The Executive Director advised the panel that the presentation would provide an update on the in- year performance and budget position and a summary of the draft budget for 2023 – 2024 and Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). The panel comments would be included in a consolidated report and presented to Scrutiny Board. A further report would then be presented to the Cabinet as part of the budget consultation process.

The Executive Director advised the panel that an integrated performance and budget monitoring report is presented to Cabinet on a quarterly basis. The recent report presented to Cabinet on 16 November 2022 predicted a forecast budget overspend across the Council of £1.5 million, which was mainly due to the 2022-2023 pay award.

The Executive Director gave a summary of the Quarter 2 performance of the Council against 56 KPIs in the Our City: Our Plan performance framework document. The Executive Director advised the panel that 33 of the KPIs have shown improvement or have seen similar performance, 17 are yet to be updated and 6 have seen a decrease in performance compared to the previous quarter.

The Executive Director gave further details of the performance of the service in Quarter 2 in the following areas, children's social care, education, and NEET.

The Executive Director commented on the summary forecast budget position for the families and children service areas and invited James Barlow, Finance Business Partner, to present the detailed budget report.

The Finance Business Partner advised the panel about efforts to improve the budget scrutiny process and welcomed comments on the approach and the 2023-2024 Draft Budget and MTFS 2023-2024 to 2025-2026 overview report.

The Finance Business Partner commented that overall Children's and Education Services is projected to have an underspend of £1.1 million. The Finance Business Partner advised that the main areas of underspend were in speciality support and the closure of internal residential childcare provision, and the budget is being maintained while the new provision is being prepared.

The Finance Business Partner gave an overview of the key highlights of the 2022-2023 budget and MTFS report that was approved by Council on 2 March 2022. The Council is required to set a balanced budget and regular updates are presented to Cabinet to advise them of changes. The reported forecast budget deficit of £12.6 million in 2023 – 2024 and is predicted to rise to £25.8 million over the medium term to 2025 – 2026. The Finance Business Partner advised the panel that work will continue to bring forward proposals to set a balanced budget for 2023-2024.

The Finance Business Partner commented on the earmarked reserves within the remit of the panel and provided a web link with further details.

The Executive Director commented on the strategic risks report presented to Cabinet on 16 November 2022 and gave details about those risks within the remit of the panel. The Executive Director highlighted that a key risk to the service is the underspend on staffing due to challenges in recruiting social workers.

The Executive Director added that there is a national shortage of social workers generally and specifically in child protection and commented on the challenges this presents to the service.

The Executive Director updated the panel on progress of a plan to create peripatetic team that would help to fill vacancies in social work team, at a lower cost to the Council than using agency workers. The Executive Director commented on the challenges in recruiting experienced social workers to work in the peripatetic team and highlighted other initiatives being considered to mitigate against this and other risks outlined in the report.

The Executive Director commented on the work being done to manage the demand on the service and gave examples of areas contributing to the increase and areas of success which has led to an underspend on the budget.

The Executive Director commented on the strategic risks relevant to the panel that was reported to Cabinet on 16 November 2022.

The panel were invited to comment on the report and presentation.

The panel congratulated the Executive Director on the continued good management of Council finances.

The panel commented on the importance of maintaining earmarked reserves referred to the report at an appropriate level.

The panel queried if the projected underspend of £1.1 million in the overall Children's and Education Services budget was ringfenced for Children's Services purposes or would it be used to reduce the reported budget deficit.

The Finance Business Manager commented that at the end of the year any budget underspends would be go back into the corporate budget for next year's budget. There would however be discussions with the service areas about retaining any underspend for future years as part of the budget planning process. The details of changes would be included in the budget out-turn report. The proposal would be included in a future report to Cabinet to consider and approve.

The panel supported the view that the budget underspend should be used to support children and families.

The panel requested a briefing paper on the outcome of the decision.

The panel requested a briefing paper to provide an update on the budget underspend position in March 2023 following the meeting of Cabinet.

The panel expressed concerns about the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on residents and queried what extra support would be provided to support families, in addition to the Supporting Families Grant.

The Finance Business Partner commented that previous underspends in Children Services have been built up over the years offset future pressures on the service. The overall budget for the service has been well managed and the level of demand in some specialist services has reduced, which has allowed these funds to be built up over time.

The Finance Business Partner commented that in response to the larger than expected pay award the plan will be to use £1 m of the supporting families to help offset budget pressures across the service in the current financial year. This is one off grant payment.

The panel commented that in view of the challenges of the rising inflation and the cost-of-living crisis whether the Children's and Education Services budget was sufficient and if there were other plans to respond the issue.

The Finance Business Partner advised the panel that the Council is allocated grants by Government and some of the payments are ring fenced and those that are not ring fenced can be used without restrictions. There have been underspends on the children services in the last few years, especially on the recruitment and funds have been added to the Children's and Education Services budget to offset budget pressures in the future. The Finance Business Partner commented on the example of the impact of the pay award which was larger than forecast. The plan is use £1 million of the underspend on to Children's and Education Services budget to support the Council budget in this financial year. The plan would be to add the funds back into the budget in the following year.

Alison Hinds, Deputy Director Social Care, commented on the work being done with other partners to support families with the challenge of the cost-of-living crisis. The Deputy Director Social Care advised the panel that this work is supported by a financial wellbeing strategy which helps ensure available resources and external grants are being used to support residents across the City feeling the impact of the cost-of-living crisis.

The panel queried the rationale for calculations presented for the increase in the forecast budget deficit of £12.6m (2023-2024) to £25.8m over the medium term to 2025-2026. The panel asked for details of the financial pressures which have contributed to the estimates detailed in the presentation.

The Finance Business Partner commented that the estimates given are like those given in previous budget forecasts and further details are available in the October 2022 finance report presented to Cabinet. The Finance Business Partner commented on the challenges when calculating estimates from the number of one year funding settlements, and the impact of the recent pay awards and significant increase in inflationary costs as examples of the funding pressures.

The Finance Business Partner reassured the panel that the Council has a good track record of forecasting budget estimates, and a prudent approach is taken when considering the level of grant income that is expected as it cannot be assumed that previous grant awards will be increased in line with inflation or indeed if the grant will continue. The figures in the report are based on current assumptions and estimates of future funding levels and expenditure. The aim of presenting the budget deficit estimates is to make Councillors aware of the budgetary challenges.

The Finance Business Partner reassured the panel about the work being done to set a balanced budget which the Council has a good track record of achieving.

The panel queried when details about grant funding would be published and if advance notice is given of the level of the award.

The Finance Business Partner advised the panel the Council will sometime get an indication of the settlement figure based on the departmental budget reports. The details of the final budget settlement figures are published in January 2023.

The panel thanked the presenters for the presentation.

Resolved:

1. The panel comments on the draft budget and its alignment to the priorities of the Council to be noted.
2. The panel comments on the Draft Budget and MTFS 2023-2024 to 2025-26 to be noted and included in the feedback report on budget consultation response when presented to Scrutiny Board.
3. The Finance Business Manager to advise the panel of the outcome of discussion about the Children's and Education Services current budget underspend being taken forward to 2023- 2024.

8 **Education Performance in Wolverhampton Schools and Settings 2021-2022 (report to follow)**

The Chair invited Cllr Burden, Cabinet for Education and Skills, to introduce the report. The Cabinet Member commented on the positive findings in the report, and the progress made over the years to improve educational attainment scores. The Cabinet Member commented that 88 per cent of Wolverhampton schools were rated by Ofsted overall as being either good or outstanding as of November 2022. The figure is above the West Midlands average of 85 per cent and in line with national rates.

The Cabinet Member commented on the progress of Wolverhampton schools at each of the key stages, highlighting the excellent performance at Key Stage2, where Wolverhampton was rated above the national average in reading, writing and arithmetic.

The Cabinet Member invited Phil Leivers, Head of Education Excellence, to present the detail of the report.

The Head of Education Excellence, commented on improvements to the layout of the report and that in response to recent comments from a panel member that further changes to include more analysis to better understand the impact on work of the service will be added to the next annual report to the panel.

The Head of Education Excellence commented that education is a key priority for the Council and outlined the development of the strategy over the years. The Head of Education Excellence advised the panel that a holistic approach was taken to improving educational achievement which looks at how the Council supports children and their families both at home and in schools.

The Head of Education Excellence commented on the positive impact of the continued investment in core education services compared to other authorities, which has contributed to the sustained improvements in performance.

The Head of Education Excellence highlighted the key educational achievements during the period 2021- 2022 and commented specifically on the progress made by pupils at Key Stage 2, 4 and 5.

The Head of Education Excellence advised the panel that there is a wider review of post 16 education qualifications and advice given to support decision about future pathways. The review led by the City of Wolverhampton Council includes representatives from schools and other education providers. The Council will publish the review findings and recommendations in March 2023.

The panel were invited to comment on the report.

The panel welcomed the report and congratulated the presenter on the performance of schools.

The panel queried the Council's relationship with schools and how successes about improved educational performance is shared with them. The Head of Education Excellence commented that results of Ofsted attainment scores are included in a weekly school bulletin.

The panel queried what was being done to capture the experiences of those pupils who perform better during assessments rather than focusing on exam performance as a success measure, in the annual report.

The Head of Education Excellence welcomed the comment about the importance to consider the voice of students and agreed to consider how this information could be collected and presented.

The panel commented on the importance of getting data presented at school level as there was concern that the use of averages in the report makes it difficult to differentiate between the performance of schools to help Councillors understand where further support is needed. The panel commented on the importance of improving education standards across all Wolverhampton schools and using this school level information to decide where Council resources should be best used.

The panel suggested that the first year of school validated results should be used as a baseline to assess the performance of schools in future years and the impact of the strategy. The panel commented that the data could also be used to analyse the data based on ethnicity and demography to better understand those groups of children who are underperforming.

The Executive Director of Families reassured the panel that there is a focus on improving education outcomes for all children and young people and extra resources are being used to support children and families through education and children services. The Executive Director of Families agreed to consider the comment about the inclusion of school level data in future reports but commented that a challenge is that academies are not required to share pupil level data with the Council, for example attendance figures, and other pupil data involves small numbers such as exclusions, which present a further challenge. The Council has regular meetings with DFE that can be used to escalate matters if a school does not want share pupil data. The Executive Director of Families commented that the matter can also be raised with the Regional Schools Commissioner but added that the Council has generally very good relationships with all academies within the City.

The panel queried the reason for Wolverhampton's attainment statistics for achieving the expected standard in Reading, Writing and, Maths at Key Stage 1 being below the average for the national and regional average levels, but above the rate for statistical neighbours in the table. The Head of Education Excellence advised the panel that the scores for Key Stage 1 were not included in the assessment as it was based on teacher assessment which were not externally moderated like the other key stages.

The Head of Education Excellence commented that progress was being made to improve educational performance at Key Stage 1 and acknowledged that there was acceptance that more work is needed to improve the attainment scores for Reading, Writing and, Maths.

The panel queried the level of influence the Council has over academies, where there are concerns about educational performance issues, for example, the underachievement of boys compared to girls. In reference to the earlier conversation the panel also queried if the Council offers educational resources and support free to academies to support the progress of children in Wolverhampton.

The Head of Education Excellence outlined the current training offer from the Council which is open to all schools and other support provided to schools based on a service level agreement. The panel were advised that academies were also able to purchase support from independent education training providers. The Head of Education Excellence advised the panel that training sessions on citizenship and language is oversubscribed by academies.

The panel suggested that a future report on educational performance should include an analysis of the amount of the support given to academies as a proportion of the support given to maintained schools in the City.

The panel thanked the presenter for the report and congratulated the schools on the improved performance against local and national measures.

The panel asked for more detailed information to assess changes in educational performance over time to better understand the impact of the work being done to improve outcomes for children and young people.

The Head of Education Excellence advised the panel that the data is based on the information published by the DFE for local authorities and added that further analysis to provide school level data could be done. However, this would be subject to getting schools to agree to allow the information they provide to be used in the way needed. There are discussions ongoing with schools to agree a draft data sharing agreement that would allow the data to be used and published.

The panel suggested that a briefing paper to update panel on progress on collating the data needed be presented to a future meeting. The panel discussed the need to recognise the role of school governors in allocating resources and the limited role of the local authority in such circumstances to influence such decisions because of legislative changes.

The panel discussed the value and importance of early years education.

The Executive Director of Families outlined the range of early years initiatives provided in recognition of the important contribution of early years to improving

educational outcomes for children. The Executive Director suggested a future report on the work of the early years multi agency group could be useful to present to the panel at a future meeting.

The panel thanked the presenters for the report and the presentation.

Resolved:

1. The panel agreed to note the annual report findings and the improved educational performance of Wolverhampton schools in 2021 -2022.
2. The panel comments on the content of the annual report to be considered when presenting the next annual report.
3. The panel comments on the performance of schools and academies to be noted.
4. The Head of Education Excellence to provide information requested by the panel either as a briefing paper or a future meeting.
5. The Executive Director of Families to present a report on the work of early years multi agency group in supporting early years development to a future meeting of the panel.

9

Virtual School Head Annual Report 2022

The Chair invited Darren Martindale, Virtual School Head, to present the report.

The Virtual School Head advised the panel that the draft annual report 2022 was being presented for comment before being considered for approval by Cabinet. The Virtual School Head advised the panel the presentation will give a summary of annual report which details the educational outcomes and achievements of children and young people in care and care leavers from September 2021 to July 2022 in Wolverhampton.

The annual report also highlights, future priorities for 2022 - 2023, and areas for development of the work being done by the Council and other partners to support the achievement of children and young people in care.

The Virtual School Head advised the panel of the statutory responsibilities of the Virtual School Head and explained that the data in the report is based on the Department of Education definition of 'looked after child' which states that this is a child or young person "who have been continuously looked after for at least 12 months up to and including 31 March 2022".

The Virtual School Head commented that the vast majority of looked after children attend schools rated as either 'good' or 'outstanding' and explained the small number of children attending a school rated as 'inadequate' would only do so for a limited period and a specific reason. A decision about moving a child from a school with an Ofsted rating of 'inadequate' would be based on what is in the best interest of that child.

The Virtual School Head commented on the main educational achievements of children in care in the annual report.

The Virtual School Head referred to an earlier discussion where it was highlighted that research suggest that exam-based system disproportionately affect pupils who are already disadvantaged. The Virtual School Head commented that this view is supported by the results of the high GSCE attainment scores at Key Stage 4 for looked after children based on teacher assessment during the pandemic, which has subsequently fallen this year following the return to exam-based assessments.

The Virtual School Head commented on the overall improved educational performance in GSCE attainment. The Virtual School Head commented on the support given to children to allow them to pursue other interests, for example, some children have been given tuition lessons to allow them to develop their musical skills. The service is working to improve the local arts and cultural offer for children in care.

The Virtual School Head commented that they were not having issues with schools not accepting applications from children in care and highlighted the good working relationship with schools. The Virtual School Head added that there is a good understanding among schools about their corporate parent responsibilities and the value of attachment trauma informed practice.

The Virtual School Head advised the panel that two local schools were nominated for The Alex Timpson ARC Attachment Award in 2022 in recognition of their good work in this area, and Low Hill Nursery School was successful in the early years category.

The Virtual School Head gave an overview of the post 16 education outcomes and highlighted the success of nine care leavers who graduated from university in 2022, the highest number to date.

The Virtual School Head commented on the areas for development detailed in the main report to build on the educational achievements in 2022. The Virtual School Head added that the service is developing a more comprehensive dataset to track the educational progress of children, and this has been supported by a virtual school performance dashboard.

The Virtual School Head advised the panel that a review of attachment and trauma aware practice in schools is being considered with the aim of achieving a more consistent practice.

The Virtual School Head commented on the key objectives for 2022-2023, highlighting efforts to increase the participation of young people in arts and culture in care and other enrichment activities with the aim of extending the offer to all children with a social worker. The Virtual School Head agreed to report progress against the key objectives in next year's annual report on the work being done to improve the life chances of children and young people in care, or who have previously been in care.

The panel thanked the presenter for the very encouraging report and the achievements of the service in supporting children and young people care.

The panel queried the reference in the report to 20 per cent of pupils recorded as persistently absent and asked for more details about the factors behind this and profile of young people involved.

The Virtual School Head reassured the panel that the majority of young people have specific and genuine reasons for their absence, but there is small minority of young people with higher levels of needs which the service struggles to provide the appropriate level of educational support, which can result in either suspensions or lower attendance.

The Virtual School Head added that the long-term impact of persistent school absence, while a concern, based on experience of young people in this situation still do well educationally and it does not necessarily impact on the rest of their life.

The panel queried the process for developing smart educational targets for a young person as part of drafting their Personal Education Plans (PEP). The PEP details how the professionals responsible for the looked after child will assist their academic success and results.

The Virtual School Head commented on the work being done to strengthen the auditing framework in response to this issue and highlighted plans to involve Social Care Managers to try and improve this issue. The Virtual School Head is also working closely with school-based education leads to talk about the issues and this work is supported by additional training material.

The panel discussed the importance of high-quality teaching delivered in a way that is non-threatening and makes clear what it is children must learn, to improving educational attainment standards.

The Virtual School Head supported the comment and added that the shift in approach from DFE is reflected in the flexibility given to how local authorities were able to decide how to use their school-led tutoring grant. The approach builds on the flexibility given to local authorities by DFE on the use of pupil premium funds.

The panel thanked the presenter for report and the excellent progress made by children and young people in care.

Resolved:

1. The panel wanted to formally record their congratulations to the Virtual School Head and the professionals who have contributed to work that has helped support children in care and the improvement in educational achievements detailed in the annual report.
2. The panel comments on the draft Virtual School Head Annual Report 2022 report to be noted.

10

Strong Families, Children and Young People - Draft Scrutiny Work Programme 2022- 2023

Earl Piggott-Smith, Scrutiny Officer, to present the report.

The Scrutiny Officer advised the panel of future agenda items detailed in the work programme report.

The Scrutiny Officer advised the panel that the work programme will be updated to include actions agreed earlier in the meeting.

The Scrutiny Officer invited the panel to comment on the draft work programme and to suggest future agenda items.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to note the report.