

Strong Families, Children, and Young People Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 6 February 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 Dr Michael Hardacre
Cllr Carol Hyatt
Cllr Andrew McNeil
Cllr Louise Miles
Cllr Lynne Moran

Employees

Earl Piggott-Smith
Emma Bennett
Alison Hinds
Bill Hague
Laura Gittos
Jaswinder Kaur

Scrutiny Officer
Executive Director of Families
Deputy Director of Children's Social Care
Head of Business and Support Services
Head of Governance
Democratic Services Manager

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 Lovinyer Daley
- 4 **Declarations of interest**
There were no declarations of interest recorded.

5 **Determined Admission Arrangements for Community and Voluntary Controlled Schools 2024-2025**

The Chair invited Bill Hague, Head of Service, School Business and Support, to present the report. The Head of Service advised the panel that the report is being presented for pre-decision scrutiny before it is considered for approval by Cabinet on 22 February 2023.

The Head of Service advised the panel that every seven years the service undertakes a public consultation on the admission arrangements for community and voluntary controlled schools. The aim is to ensure the admission arrangements are fair, equitable and easy to understand.

As part of the review the admission arrangements for secondary and primary schools operated by academy trusts in Wolverhampton was considered to check how their admission arrangements differ to the processes used by the Council's.

The Head of Service advised the panel that several academy trusts have taken advantage of the option to include children of school staff in their school admission criteria list. The change has been considered to be helpful for academies in the recruitment and retention of teaching staff, particularly in those subject areas where there is a shortage.

The Head of Service advised the panel that in accordance with the requirements of the Schools Admission Code (2021) an external consultation was held about adding this change as a sixth criteria to the school admission arrangements list. The Head of Service advised the panel that 69 people completed the survey and overall, 62 per cent of respondents supported the change to the admission criteria.

The Head of Service added that the proposed change is likely to have minimal impact on other families as the numbers involved are likely to be small.

This change has now been made to the revised oversubscription criterion relating to children of staff.

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

The panel while welcoming members of the public who took part in the consultation commented that the figures for responses only represent a very small percentage of the total number of applications from parents.

The panel queried where most of the challenges are in terms of demands on the service.

The Head of Service commented about the pride in Wolverhampton representing schools in the West Midlands region on the Department for Education (DFE) working group for school admissions. The group helps shape national school admission policy.

The Head of Service commented that issue that takes most time is managing the impact on the service of the option in the school admission code which allows parents to apply to change school at any time during the year.

This presents a challenge as there no responsibility in law for local authorities to co-ordinate in year admissions applications.

The Head of Service commented that Wolverhampton took decision that there is a professional and moral obligation to continue to coordinate in year school admissions. The policy means that if a parent living in Wolverhampton needs to change school, they can apply to the Council rather than having to contact the school to check what spaces are available. The Head of Service advised the panel however that this policy creates exceptional amounts of work as the service receives over 3000 in-year applications every year.

The Head of Service commented that without such a policy there is a risk of more children missing education due to delay in finding them a suitable school place and outlined the range of work done with colleagues to support families and reduce the risk further.

The panel wanted reassurance that parents of looked after children would not be affected by the change in the admission criteria.

The Head of Service confirmed that children and young people in care and in former children and young people in care are in the highest criteria, also the evidence from academies suggest that the change has not led to any concerns locally from parents about the policy as the numbers involved is very small.

The panel discussed the policy financial support available to families to help with travel costs if their child is allocated a place at the nearest school with places and the criteria to qualify for assistance. The panel discussed All Age Travel Assistance Policy and issue of home to school transport for children of compulsory school age.

The Head of Service explained the policy and legislation relating to providing financial support to families with home to school travel costs and the advice given to parents to help them make an informed decision when making submitting their preferences for a school.

The panel discussed the issue of financial support available for families with school travel costs and reference was made to the Education Act 1996.

The Act states that there is no legal duty on local authorities to provide financial support for children of compulsory school age (5-16) and that it is the responsibility of the parent or guardian to ensure that their child gets to and from school they have been allocated.

The Head of Service agreed to share a copy of the current All Age Travel Assistance Policy which details the criteria for parents to qualify for free school travel assistance with the panel.

The panel agreed to add the All-Age Travel Assistance Policy as future agenda item as it was outside the focus of the task which is the pre-decision scrutiny of the revised school admissions arrangements.

The panel thanked the presenter for the report.

Resolved:

1. The panel support the Co-ordinated Admission Schemes for secondary and primary school admissions at the normal year of entry for 2024-2025.

2. The panel support proposed change to the admission arrangements including the oversubscription criterion relating to children of staff for community and voluntary controlled schools for 2024-2025.
3. The panel agreed to add a report on the All-Age Travel Assistance Policy to the work programme.

6 **School Appeals Update**

The Chair invited Laura Gittos, Head of Governance, to give the presentation.

The Head of Governance advised the panel that it would be joint presentation with Jaswinder Kaur, Democratic Services and Systems Manager.

The Democratic Services and Systems Manager advised the panel that School Standards and Framework Act 1998, gives responsibility for the making arrangements for appeals against the refusal of a school place with the admission authority of the school.

The school and the admission authority must act in accordance with the School Admission Appeals Code 2022 and other relevant legislation.

The Democratic Services and Systems Manager advised the panel that the aim of the code is to ensure that school appeals are conducted in a fair and transparent way. The code is prescriptive in terms of deadlines to be met for hearing appeals.

The Democratic Services and Systems Manager explained the school appeal arrangements and the additional processes to assist parents, for example, the service will contact parents in advance of the appeal to check if they want to submit any additional evidence, if they are familiar with using Microsoft Teams and to explain the different stages of the appeal process so parents understand what will be happening.

The Democratic Services and Systems Manager outlined the school appeal process and advised the panel that the appeal will be heard by three independent appeal panel members who have received full training on the code. The appeal panel members will be supported by a clerk who will record the proceedings and offer impartial advice to all parties.

The Democratic Services and Systems Manager explained the process after the appeal hearing and advised that a parent after receiving the decision letter can make a complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman if they feel either the Council or the panel has not followed the proper procedures in the appeal hearing.

The Head of Governance outlined the findings from a review of the School Appeals Unit conducted with the Democratic Service and Systems Manager. The Head of Governance gave details of the action planned or taken against each of the areas identified for development.

The Head of Governance advised the panel that the School Appeals Unit is a statutory service and is looking to develop and improve it further.

The panel were invited to comment on the presentation.

The panel queried how the views of parents are captured to find out what they think about the appeal process and how it is used to improve the service.

The Democratic Service and Systems Manager advised the panel that the colleagues do ask parents for feedback about their experiences at the end of the appeal hearing. In addition, the service regularly reviews its processes to see what improvements can be made to ensure that the policy is fit for purpose.

The panel queried the support provided to parents whose first language is not English or who may not be able to best articulate their case at the appeal hearing.

The Democratic Service and Systems Manager advised the panel that all parents and guardians are made aware in advance that they can bring a representative with them should they wish to support them. The appeal decision is based on the evidence submitted at the meeting.

The Democratic Service and Systems Manager added that as part of the service pre-checks are done with parents to check they understand the process and can represent themselves and if required an interpreter will be provided.

The Democratic Service and Systems Manager commented that team members are encouraged to think about using different language in pre-check meetings with parents to try to ensure that the parent or guardian can properly take part in the appeal.

The panel queried the impact of in-year school appeals applications on the service in terms of workload. The Democratic Service and Systems Manager advised the panel that the main pressure on the team is dealing with appeals for September intake but is also aware of the increase in the number of in-year school appeals applications.

The increase in the number in-year school appeals in Wolverhampton is like that experienced in other urban cities.

The panel commented on the importance of working proactively with Wolverhampton Homes to make parents aware of the demand on school places and the need to prepare for a possible appeal if they are not successful with their application.

The Head of Service commented on the challenge in dealing with the rapidly changing situation about the number of school places available at a school and as a result it can be difficult to give timely advice to families on current vacancies.

The Head of Service commented on the statistics from the monthly monitoring of surplus places in the city which suggest that the cohort of children will generally increase by around 10 forms of entry, this is equivalent to finding places for an extra 300 pupils per year group which the service is trying to manage.

The panel congratulated the presenters on the performance of the school appeals service and supported the planned improvement work outlined in the presentation.

The panel discussed the membership of school appeal panels and supported efforts to ensure that it is reflective of the local community and in terms of having people with a wider breadth of professions and experiences.

The panel thanked the presenters for the report and congratulated them on the performance of the service.

Resolved:

1. The panel agreed to note the report.
2. The panel comments on the presentation to be noted.
3. The Head of Governance and Democratic Service and Systems Manager to update the panel on progress of the School Appeals – Development Plan at a meeting in six months.