

Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 6 March 2024

Attendance

Members of the Children & Young People Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Paul Sweet
Cllr Lovinyer Daley
Cllr Carol Hyatt
Cllr Qaiser Azeem (Chair)
Cllr Jenny Cockayne
Cllr Jane Francis
Cllr Jeszemma Howl
Cllr Wendy Dalton (Substitute for Cllr Stephanie Haynes)
Cllr Wendy Thompson (Substitute for Cllr Christopher Haynes)

Co-opted Members (5)

Wolverhampton Youth Council

In Attendance

Cllr Chris Burden

Cabinet Member for Children and Young
People

Employees

Earl Piggott-Smith
Alison Hinds
Helen Bakewell
Brenda Wile
Bill Hague
Laura Gittos
Jaswinder Kaur
Courtney Abbott

Scrutiny Officer
Director of Children's Services
Head of Inclusion & Empowerment
Deputy Director of Education
Head of School Business and Support
Head of Governance
Democratic Services and Systems Manager
Quality and Improvement Advanced
Practitioner
Principal Social Worker

Jennifer Rogers

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 **Welcome and Introductions**
Cllr Qaiser Azeem, 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**

The Chair explained the process to be followed during the meeting and for asking questions.

3 **Apologies**

Apologies were received from the following members of the panel:

Cllr Dr Michael Hardacre

Cllr Christopher Haynes – Sub Cllr Wendy Thompson

Cllr Stephanie Haynes – Sub Cllr Wendy Dalton

Cllr Lamina Lloyd

Cllr Jane Francis

4 **Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest recorded.

5 **Minutes of the previous meeting (31 January 2024)**

The Panel agreed to amend the minutes to record Cllr Lovinyer Daley as being in attendance at the meeting.

That the minutes of the meeting held on 31 January 2014, subject to the agreed changes, be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

6 **SEND and Inclusion Strategy (report to follow)**

The Chair invited Helen Bakewell, Head of SEND and Inclusion, to present the update.

The Head of SEND advised the panel that when the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) and Inclusion Strategy 2024-27 report was presented to the panel meeting on 31 January 2024 it was agreed that a further report would be presented to respond to specific areas of concern.

The Head of SEND gave a summary of update actions and progress in the following areas in response to the issues highlighted:

1. Co-production and public consultation work
2. Financial pressures on the High Needs Block (HNB) funding
3. The language used in the strategy document

The Head of SEND gave a summary of the changes made to the strategy document in response to comments from the panel. The Head of SEND advised the panel that the attached report would be presented to Cabinet on 20 March 2024 to approve the revised strategy document.

The Head of SEND invited the panel to endorse the revised Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) and Inclusion Strategy 2024-27

The Head of SEND also invited the panel to consider the questions in the briefing paper and to comment on the response.

A panel member congratulated the Head of SEND on the revised draft and welcomed the changes made and hoped that they will improve what is currently

being delivered. The panel member offered her thanks for all the work done in preparing the strategy and was confident that it would make a huge difference to lives of children and young people with SEND in Wolverhampton.

A panel member while welcoming the further details about the financial pressures on the HNB funding commented that the members of the Schools Forum had a verbal rather than a written update report on HNB funding. The panel member commented that the Schools Forum High Needs Funding Sub Group had a written report on the HNB and queried if this could be shared with the panel at a future meeting.

Bill Hague, Head of School Business and Support, advised the panel that he has responsibility for overseeing the functions of this group and agreed to take the recommendation to the meeting of Schools Forum High Needs Funding Sub Group and report back to the panel.

A panel member welcomed the changes made to the original draft strategy but queried the lack of reference to KPIs in the document and expressed concern about decisions based on a low number of survey responses. The panel member also asked for details of the age range of pupils going Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and children requiring specialist SEN provision and the number of appeals currently in progress.

The panel member queried the distribution and promotion of the 'Ready Steady Go' leaflet which supports children and young people in the preparation for adulthood regardless of whether they have an EHCP. The panel member asked for evidence of progress.

Brenda Wile, Deputy Director of Education, reassured the panel that as regards the query about missing KPIs that under each of the strategies there is a detailed set of actions which set out the plan to achieve the required improvements and priorities in Wolverhampton SEND and Inclusion Strategy 2024-27 document. The supporting data relating to the KPIs is benchmarked, and progress monitored by the SEND and Inclusion Partnership Board.

The Deputy Director advised the panel as regards the query about providing an age profile breakdown of young people with EHCP that an analysis of the data shows increasing numbers of young people. The information is monitored and reported to the SEND and Inclusion Partnership Board every six weeks. The Deputy Director agreed to share the information with the panel.

The Deputy Director advised the panel that as regards the query about Priority 2: Successful transition and preparation that the service is being reviewed as part of a Local Area thematic review of the services preparation for adulthood. The three-week review is being led by Ofsted and CQC and will assess the impact of improvements to the service and better understand the barriers to preparing young people for adulthood. The Deputy Director added other that six other authorities are also involved in the review as part of a wider national research project and agreed to share the letter of the findings with the panel.

The Deputy Director commented that the service is positive about the impact of the improvements and that significant progress has been made and hoped that the review will recognise this change, whilst accepting that there is still work to be done.

The Deputy Director agreed to consider the suggestion of further action to raise awareness about the 'Ready Steady Go' leaflet.

A panel member queried how the service planned to achieve the outcome in the strategy for leaders to have an accurate, shared understanding of the needs of children and young people in their area and details of the methods to be used.

The Head of SEND and Inclusion advised the panel that the service will be working with young people in High5, who have started work on drafting the questionnaire about how young people are supported and to identify what their needs and concerns are. The Head of SEND and Inclusion added that the service will also be working with members of Voice 4 Parents, a key strategic partner, to understand the voice of children, young people and adults and the support needed.

The Head of SEND and Inclusion commented that in terms of expected outcomes the service is hoping to see an improvement in how families feel that they are getting in terms of support. The Head of SEND and Inclusion reassured the panel that where there are disagreements that that they can be resolved through mediation quickly than the complaints process. This issue relates to a performance measure in the strategy which refers to young people feeling that they have had their concerns responded to quickly without the need to go through any additional processes.

The Director of Children's Services added that the service will be going broader than the organisations referred to better understand the diverse needs of children and young people. The work will be supported by a Joint Strategic Needs Assessment which be reviewed regularly so that the service understands how the needs of children and young people are changing. The approach will also be informed by the Quality Assurance Framework which will provide evidence about what is working and help understand the barriers to progress and how they can be overcome.

A panel members queried plans to promote to the wider community the work of High5 and Voice4Parents. The Director of Children's Services reassured the panel that the service has a strong engagement and participation team. The Director highlighted the work of the co-production team which promotes opportunities for young people to get involved in decision making. In addition, the Local Offer is another option for young people to get involved and the service promotes participation in school and college groups.

The Director suggested that it would be helpful to meet with members of Youth Council to discuss the issue further and their ideas for promoting opportunities for young people to get involved.

The panel supported the proposals and asked for an update on progress from the Director in the next 14 days.

The Chair thanked the presenters for the report.

Resolved:

1. The panel agreed to endorse the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) and Inclusion Strategy 2024-27, and the recommendations detailed in Cabinet report dated 8 March 2024.

2. The panel comments on briefing paper and presentation to be noted and actioned.
3. The Director of Children's Services to provide an update on progress of agreed actions to the panel within 14 days.

7 **School Appeals**

The Chair invited Laura Gittos, Head of Governance and Jaswinder Kaur, Democratic Services and Systems Manager, to give the presentation.

The Head of Governance advised the panel that when a previous report was presented on the performance of the appeals team it was agreed that a further report would be presented in 12 months to give an update on progress of plans for delivering further service improvements in the Schools Appeal Unit.

The Head of Governance gave an update on progress of improvements since February 2023 and the current position against the agreed actions as of March 2024.

The Head of Governance invited the Democratic Services and Systems Manager to present an update on the preparation for the normal round of school entry appeals.

The Democratic Services and Systems Manager gave an overview of the number of appeals submitted, withdrawn, and upheld analysed by type of appeal comparing data for 2022/23 to 2023/24.

The Democratic Services and Systems Manager outlined the preparations and the timelines for the normal round of school entry in September for 2024-25. The Democratic Services and Systems Manager outlined the key achievements of the service.

A copy of the presentation is available.

The panel were invited to comment on the presentation.

The Chair thanked the presenters for the report and welcomed the changes to make the process easier for the public to understand the school appeal process. The Chair invited panel members to comment on the presentation.

A panel member congratulated the performance of the school's appeal team for their hard work, particularly during the pandemic, to manage the high number of appeals.

The panel member shared personal experiences of supporting parents through the appeal process and limited success of cases.

The panel member queried if training could be offered to newly elected Councillors to help them better understand the process.

The Head of Governance thanked the panel member for their positive comments and advised the panel that the appeal process can be very emotional, and the service does a lot of pre-work with families to help them to prepare for the hearing.

The Head of Governance highlighted the importance of having a permanent team which helps provide consistent messaging to families and to get the service right for everyone.

The Head of Governance welcomed the idea of offering training on schools appeals to new Councillors and advised the panel that there have been discussions with colleagues in school admissions about including this issue as part of the Councillor induction programme.

The programme of training which includes a session on school's appeals has been presented to Governance and Ethics in recognition of the increase in queries to Councillors.

The Head of Governance advised the panel that the increase in school appeal queries would suggest that a more dedicated session would be more beneficial and added that details of the training will be shared with the panel when confirmed.

A panel member commented on the experience of supporting a parent who became stressed when asked to provide evidence referenced in their appeal, and how they felt confused about what was needed. The panel members highlighted the need for the service to regularly remind parents of the importance of providing evidence to support their appeal and where they can get help if needed.

The Democratic Services and Systems Manager reassured the panel that the school appeals public website has been updated and there are prompts for parents in three places about providing supporting evidence. There is also a further prompt on the invitation letter to remind parents about providing evidence in support of their appeal. The members of the school appeals team will also check through the appeal papers for any additional evidence and encourage parents when contacted to check and send any information they would like the panel to consider.

A panel member queried the reasons for parents deciding to withdraw their appeal after making an application and if the numbers were high when compared to total number of children allocated places.

The Head of School Business and Support advised the panel that in terms of pupil numbers at secondary cohort consists of 3,800 children applying for school places at Year 7. The numbers of children at reception intake are in a period of decline and currently about 3,500 and the service is managing a large number of appeal applications.

The Head of School Business and Support commented that the increase in the number of in-year school appeals is because of the increasing popularity of Wolverhampton Schools. The Head of School Business and Support added that 91 per cent of schools in Wolverhampton are rated by Ofsted as 'Outstanding' and as schools become more popular, then it is expected that more people will be wanting to move to Wolverhampton.

The panel member congratulated the service on the improvements in performance.

A panel member queried the number of special school places available.

The Head of School Business and Support advised that the Councils is currently consulting on an updated school place strategy states which proposes to increase the level of surplus places primary schools to five per cent rather than the current two per cent figure. The increase is expected to all the service to cater for the in-year growth and give parents a better opportunity to get a place at their preferred school.

The Head of School Business and Support added that the service is working to increase the availability of places in special schools, while accepting there is a national issue about the availability of such places, which are very popular.

The panel member queried the need for extra places in special schools for children with SEND and asked for further information. The Head of School Business and Support advised the panel that all special schools have no spaces but there is a recognition of need to consider how additional capacity can be introduced into some of these schools.

The panel member expressed concern about the impact of the Council plans to encourage more housebuilding in Wolverhampton and the effect that this may have on the demand for school places.

The Head of School Business and Support reassured the panel about the confidence in the accuracy of pupil number projections, which consider the expected number of new homes to be built in the City. The calculation is based on a formula provided by Department for Education and the results feed into the Council' annual school capacity survey (SCAP). The Head of School Business and Support is aware of the vision for Wolverhampton to provide more homes and the pupil number modelling work about future numbers will include any housing development for more than 10 dwellings.

A panel member queried the potential impact on schools when considering the number of appeals and the extent to which there is sufficient physical space to accommodate successful cases and how this relates to class size restrictions for primary schools.

The Head of School Business and Support advised the panel that as regards appeals for infants then the Council is generally bound by class size legislation that stated there should be no more than 30 pupils to an infant class, and this for the first consideration for the appeal panel. The Head of School Business and Support advised that there are limited grounds on which a parent can make a successful appeal. There is permitted exception within the school admissions code for schools to accept more than 30 pupils. The Head of School Business and Support accepted the extra pressure on teaching staff and resources when adding extra pupils above the limit.

A panel member queried the reasons for the reduction in the number of appeals referred to in the presentation.

The Head of School Business and Support advised the panel that the figures are a snapshot of the current situation and at the end of the academic year the service will have a better overall picture.

The Head of Governance added that in response suggested that quarterly updates can be included in the weekly Councillor Update to keep everyone informed as it is an issue of interest.

The panel supported the proposal to get quarterly updates on school appeal data.

The Deputy Director of Education commented that while there is a high number of appeals it should be noted that a high proportion of families get either their first or second school preference and the rate has improved compared to last year. The Deputy Director reassured the panel that despite the number of appeals and the popularity of some schools, the service is performing well in terms of parents getting one of their school preferences.

The Chair thanked the presenters for the report.

Resolved:

1. The panel agreed to note the improvements made in the Schools Appeals Unit and support the preparation for the normal round of entry.
2. The Head of Governance to include quarterly updates on school appeals data to the weekly Councillor Update briefing.
3. The Head of Governance agreed to include the offer of training on school appeals to new Councillors as part of the Councillor induction programme.

8 **Children's Social Work and Wider Workforce Health Check 2023**

The Chair invited Courtney Abbott, Quality and Improvement Advanced Practitioner, to present the report.

The Quality and Improvement Advanced Practitioner advised the panel that the presentation would provide a summary of the main findings from the annual health check survey of employees in social work and wider workforce working with children, young people, and families in Wolverhampton. The purpose of the health check survey is part of ongoing assessment of the service.

The Quality and Improvement Advanced Practitioner advised the panel the attached report gives further details of the background to the survey, the main findings, and actions. The survey helps identify strengths and areas requiring greater focus and informs the Workforce Development Planning. The survey also supports the continuous improvement of Children's Services practice throughout Wolverhampton.

The Quality and Improvement Advanced Practitioner explained that in addition to completing the survey online there was also the option to complete a paper form and return in ballot boxes located in different areas of the city. The aim of the change was to encourage more people to take part in the survey.

The Quality and Improvement Advanced Practitioner advised the panel that the action plan drafted in response to the survey findings will be overseen by Children's Education and Skills leadership team. A report is presented quarterly to provide an update on progress against actions.

The panel were recommended to comment on the findings of the report and to give feedback and challenge on the proposed actions to improve practice conditions for the health of social workers and wider workforce.

The Quality and Improvement Advanced Practitioner highlighted the key improvements and achievements reported in the survey responses and the action plan.

A copy of the presentation is attached.

The Chair thanked the presenter for the report and the improvements compared to the findings in the previous annual report. The panel were invited to comment on the report.

A panel member queried which colleagues in education referenced in the report were invited to participate in the survey and commented on findings that teachers were reporting that they were working fewer hours compared to last, did not reflect her understanding of the situation and wanted some clarity.

The Quality and Improvement Advanced Practitioner advised the panel that education service falls under Children's Social Care and includes colleagues in education psychology, SEND assessment, sensory inclusion services, specialist learning support, were invited to take part in the survey.

A panel member congratulated the service on the achievement of Wolverhampton Council being rated among the top 25 percent of Councils providing children services and that it was an excellent report, and the work of social work teams was very much appreciated.

A panel member queried if the survey included both permanent and agency employees.

Jennifer Rogers, Principal Social Worker, advised the panel that the survey includes student social workers, social workers and newly qualified social workers and permanent agency workers.

A panel member queried the number of appraisals that an employee would expect to receive and expressed concern that 53 per cent of employees took part and a higher response was expected. The panel spotted a possible error in the calculation in para 4.10 of the report about the length of time qualified social workers had worked for the Council.

The Principal Social Worker advised the panel that professional conversations or appraisals are done several times a year in addition to monthly supervision sessions. The sessions would always cover personal development, workload manageability, stress levels.

A dip sampling exercise was done to assess the quality of supervisions and triangulated against other data. The Principal Social Worker commented that the Council has excellent social workers but accepted that the survey response rate needs to improve, and the service is working hard to do this. The Principal Social Worker gave a summary of the actions being taken, for example, encouraging social workers to use dedicated time during briefings to complete the survey forms online in recognition of the work pressures. Overall, the number of people who have taken part in the survey has increased.

The Principal Social Worker advised that detailed information about the number of respondents who have worked more than 11 years is available.

The Principal Social Worker commented on the national recruitment and retention challenges in children social services and outlined the range of work being done to provide alternative career options for progression. The aim is to provide a balance within teams of experienced and newly qualified workers.

The Quality and Improvement Advanced Practitioner advised the panel the correct figures in para 4.10 in the report is 15.3% (20) for the number of respondents who have worked for the Council as a qualified social worker for 12 months or less.

A panel member commented on the feasibility of responding the changes reported in the survey of social workers wanting a reduction in the level of administration and more manageable workloads while acknowledging their positive benefits but queried if this was possible to achieve.

The panel member suggested that adding a competitive element between teams may help encourage more people to take part in the survey.

The Principal Social Worker thanked the panel member for the idea and commented that healthy competition between social workers would be good.

The Principal Social Worker advised the panel that the issue of colleagues in social workers wanting to reduce administration has been a theme for many years and suggested the use of AI has the potential to help use systems more efficiently. The service is exploring the use of recording voice notes and other ideas to help free up more social worker and frontline practitioner time.

The Principal Social Worker reassured the panel that the service is working to reduce administrative paperwork as much as possible, while acknowledging the need for this to be proportionate and stressed that systems should not drive social work practice.

The Principal Social Worker commented on other innovative ideas to help respond to the recruitment and retention challenges, for example, looking at formalising the current approach switching from 'exit interviews' to 'staying put' interviews to talk about possible changes when people are thinking about leaving the organisation. The service is contributing to local and regional discussions and workstreams working to improve the recruitment and retention of people working in social services.

The Chair thanked the presenters for their report and their presentation.

Resolved:

The Quality and Improvement Advanced Practitioner to note the panel comments on the findings of the Children's Services' social work and wider workforce health checks for 2023.

9 **Wolverhampton Children and Young People's Self-Evaluation**

The Chair invited Lisa Preston, Deputy Director Social Care, to present report.

The Deputy Director advised the panel there is more detailed self-assessment document which covers activity for the period April 2022 to end of September 2023 (Quarter 2). The presentation would provide a summary of the main findings and performance data.

The Deputy Director advised the panel that as part of self-assessment process all local authorities are required to complete a form every six months which is sent to Ofsted to review. The form is used to inform Ofsted about the key strengths and areas for development and the services plans of progress those areas of development that impact on the lives of children and young people in Wolverhampton. The Council must provide evidence of the impact on all the families it works with.

The Deputy Director advised the panel that when Ofsted visit to inspect the Council, they will use the self-assessment document to identify any key lines of inquiry they want to investigate further. The Deputy Director explained the reasons for the delay in presenting the report to the panel and that the aim will be to present the next report in November 2024, which would cover the full year. The Deputy Director reassured the panel that while the data relates to evidence collected before September 2023 that the continuing good performance of the service has been consistent since this period.

The Deputy Director gave details of performance of the service and areas of performance for further monitoring. The Deputy Director gave a summary of the Aiming for Excellence Plan 2023- 2024 which was relaunched in February 2023 and commented on the progress and key actions completed.

The Deputy Director gave a summary of the Children's Social Care Priorities for 2023 – 2024 and the key achievements for period April to September 2023.

The Deputy Director invited panel members to comment on the report and presentation.

A copy of the presentation is available.

The Chair thanked the presenter for the report and invited panel members to comment on the report.

A panel member expressed concern about the lack of family support provision such as Family Hubs in area and stressed that were families in need in others of the City.

The Director of Children's Services acknowledged that there had been previous conversations about the issue and commented on funding factors. The Director highlighted the achievements of the service and examples of targeted and general support available to families across Wolverhampton.

The Deputy Director commented the next report to the panel will include further achievements.

A panel member commented on a local review of children's oral health and advised that a report on the findings will be presented to future meeting.

A panel member expressed concern about 519 children being homeschooled and commented that where possible, a child should ideally be educated in school. The panel member asked for details about the educational performance of children in this group compared against the score for children being educated in school. The panel member also queried the issue of travel costs for families wanting to visit a Family Hub and expressed concern about the lack of similar provision in the west side of the City.

The Deputy Director Social Care agreed to provide postcode information based on ward level analysis about which families are accessing the Family Hubs and share this information with the panel. The Deputy Director Social Care advised the details about parent address is not always recorded when they visit the Family Hubs for information and that the recently opened Hubs will not have started working with families. The Deputy Director Social Care commented that Family Hubs are located in areas of most need.

The panel discussed the need for family support in the west of the city. The Director of Children's Services commented the service is aware of the need for family support in areas of the City not covered by a Family Hub and in response to this a 'hub and spoke' model of delivery has been introduced. The model involves delivering services such as parenting groups to local community locations. The Director of Children's Services added there are ongoing discussions about how to work more creatively with other providers to make use of available spaces in recognition of the need for family support services across the city.

The Deputy Director of Education advised the panel that the detailed report on numbers of children was presented previously and suggested that this could be shared. The Deputy Director of Education reassured the panel that the Council has regular contact with 95 per cent of families who are electively home educating their children and added that work is being done to a suitable standard. The Deputy Director of Education added that action will be taken, including legal action where there are concerns about a child to bring them back into the school system as quickly as possible.

A panel member commented on the impressive range of support services following a planned visit to Graiseley Family Hub, highlighting the services such as being to register a birth at the Hub rather than attending the Civic Centre. The panel member asked for an update on progress of appointing a communication lead who will be promoting the services on offer from the network of Family Hubs to families.

The Deputy Director Social Care acknowledged the issue of transport for families and commented on the efforts to reach out to more families in different areas to tell them about the offer.

The Deputy Director Social Care added that in addition to general offer to families at the Family Hubs, there is also a bespoke offer to meet the needs of the local community. There are plans to recruit more specialist posts based at the Family Hubs in the next few months to support this.

The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People encouraged panel members to visit the Family Hubs to see the work being done to support families and the positive impact that the services are having on families.

A panel member commented on the need to think about how to reach out to families and learn the lessons from earlier initiatives such as Sure Start. The panel member highlighted the need for services to go the places where parents and to think about how the offer will be communicated and not to expect parents to always attend physical buildings to get support needed.

The Director of Children's Services accepted that the comment was a good challenge for the service in thinking about the offer to families and getting them closer to local communities. The Director suggested that this issue should be added to the panel work programme for an update on progress.

The Director of Children's Services commented on the work being done through the Locality Partnership Board to get a better understanding of the local need. This work will be supported by the development of a dashboard to help inform how services are delivered in the locality.

The panel thanked the presenters for their report.

The Chair thanked the panel members for their contributions to meeting discussions during the year. The Chair also thanked officers for their support given to the panel.

Resolved:

1. The Deputy Director Social Care to note the comments on the panel.
2. The Deputy Director agreed present an updated report of the self-assessment document to cover the 12 months period to a panel meeting in November 2024.
3. The Director of Children's Services to present to report to a future meeting of the panel on progress of work to bring family support services closer to local communities.