

Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel – Draft Minutes 5.1.21 9 (extract)

5. School Place Planning in Wolverhampton

Cllr Dr Michael Hardacre, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills, introduced the report and explained that the Local Authority has a duty to provide a sufficient number of appropriate places for all the children who wish to be educated in Wolverhampton. The Cabinet Member commented on the challenges to achieving this as a result of legislative changes which have led to the introduction of free schools, academies schools over the years. As a result, the local authority has had to adopt a much more subtle process of negotiation and consultation with the various educational providers working in the City. The Cabinet Member commented on the difficulty in preparing the report and praised the contributions which have required a whole department effort to complete.

The Cabinet Member highlighted the importance of having correct data to inform planning decisions and the document gives the framework needed to ensure that children of all ages and abilities have a school place available to them whilst at the same time helping to maintain a healthy school environment. The Cabinet Member commented on the predicted increase in the demand for school places in the future and work being planned to meet the need for places as detailed in the document.

The Cabinet Member commented on the work done to consult with a wide range of organisations in the preparation of the document that was considered to be fit for purpose to ensure that over the next few years that the Local Authority has the right number of spaces in the right places.

Bill Hague, Head of School Business and Support, introduced the report and briefed the panel on the key points of the report and the main findings from the responses to the consultation. The Head of School Business and Support advised that the document is the latest iteration of the school place planning strategy for the City.

The document was being presented for pre-decision scrutiny and comment before the report is presented to Cabinet for approval at a meeting on 20 January 2021.

Cabinet will be asked to note the outcomes of the external consultation and the impact of demographic uplift on the demand for future school places and the need to identify and develop appropriate solutions to meet anticipated demand. The consultation started on the 18 March 2020 to gather views from key partners.

The Head of School Business and Support advised the panel that the Council is not in full control of all the factors in meeting the demand for school places and commented on the role of Regional Schools Commissioner in the process.

The Head of School Business and Support commented that the strategy also covers the closure of schools as well. The Head of Business Support commented that the strategy will help to deliver an inclusive education system in the City and expressed the commitment to meet the needs of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities

The consultation received 52 responses which was much higher than the previous consultation which had only 25 responses. The Head of School Business and Support commented on the changes made to the strategy document in response to Government announcements on capital funding for schools rebuilding programmes.

The aim is to be in the position where the Local Authority can readily react to any opportunities that may arise to secure funding for either rebuilding existing schools or the building of new schools in the City.

The Head of School Business and Support advised the panel of the plan to publish an annual review of the condition and suitability of temporary accommodation in maintained schools. There is a small number of temporary buildings used for teaching still within the city in varying conditions and some which have fallen into disrepair. The Head of School Business and Support added that while some are relatively new there are some of that will start costing money in order to be kept in an appropriate condition. The plan is to undertake an annual condition review survey of temporary buildings and to use this with information provided nationally by DFE which has a scheduled timetable for undertaking a building condition survey. There was concern expressed about the time taken by Government to produce their report and also that it was considered to be subjective and tended to rely on repairs and maintenance reports.

The Head of School Business and Support commented on the commitment to develop environmentally friendly school buildings and cited examples of eco-friendly primary schools that are more energy efficient. A local primary school is due to open in the City which will be first passivhaus school of this type in the country to be built this way and a good news story.

The Local Authority is keen that any new school builds or any large expansions in the City are also environmentally friendly and developed using modern methods of construction to meet passivhaus standards.

The panel were advised that a new free school is due to open in 2022. This school will be a two-form entry primary school in the Wednesfield South Ward. A meeting has been arranged with Ward Councillors tomorrow just to update them on the proposals

The Head of School Business and Support commented on the need to have strong working relationships between schools and the City and also between the different council services in particular children services.

The panel were briefed on panel on a pilot project which will involve the co-location of social workers in a school which is expected to make better use of land and building assets.

The Head of School Business and Support commented on a recommendation in the document to review the usage of school sites and rationalising the school estate to help the Council meet its climate change objectives. The point was made that the policy would not be about taking land from schools but having professional conversations with schools around land that is not being used and which is over and above what the current guidelines require. This is; however, a longer-term aspiration and will be discussed further with colleagues across the Council.

The Head of School Business and Support commented on charts in the report which showed the movement of pupils between Wolverhampton and areas outside at both primary and secondary school levels. There charts showed a closing of gap in recent years between parent wanting to send their children to schools neighbouring authorities rather than apply to local schools. This change reflects the improving educational performance of schools in the City.

The Head of School Business and Support commented on the graph in the report which shows growth in primary school which will need action being taken in future years to make sure the local authority is providing sufficient school places.

The increased demand for primary school places has impacted on the projected demand for secondary school places which peaks in 2022. The Head of School Business and Support commented on the work being done to produce sufficient school places for 2022 and the criteria that would be applied when deciding which schools should be expanded.

The Local Authority has a responsibility for spending public money and it is important to make sure that any schemes provide value for money and are located in areas of high demand and can meet the needs of existing communities and those of emerging communities in the future. The document will be used as a framework for introducing extra school places.

The panel were invited to comment on the report and make any recommendations as appropriate. The panel queried for process for approving the establishment of an academy. The Head of School Business and Support responded that following legislative changes and advised that any schools must either be an academy or a free school and explained the process. The Local Authority cannot build any new maintained schools. In recent years the introduction of new schools has been done with the creation of free schools which are centrally funded. In this situation, local authorities would be expected to find a site for the school

The panel welcomed the focus in the report in delivering quality education and expressed concern about expanding schools that are not performing well and wanted assurance that school educational performance and quality of provision would be among factors considered and not just the opportunity to increase the number of places to meet demand. The Head of School Business and Support reassured the panel of the commitment in the strategy to creating high-quality school places.

The panel welcomed the initiative in the report to co-locate different services and the current pilot to locate social workers in secondary schools. The panel requested a more detailed report to a future meeting of the panel to include feedback from both the social workers teachers and pupils at those schools where the pilots happening to understand the successes and challenges. Emma Bennett, Director of Children's and Adult Service, agreed to the request and suggested that a report could be presented to the panel in September 2021.

The Director of Children's and Adult Service advised the panel that Wolverhampton was selected as one of number of pilot areas across the country to trial the scheme. In the scheme there are social workers placed in six secondary schools, and then another six schools that will be used as comparators. The scheme has been running since October 2020.

The panel queried the reference in the report about the use of land around schools to build extra provision and the limits that would be applied. The Head of School Business and Support explained the policy and offered reassurance that the policy would not mean using all the available space around a school when planning a school expansion. The overall viability of the proposed expansion would be considered and there is a commitment to maintaining green space areas around schools. There are some sites in the City that have huge amounts of land that are in excess of the school's needs, which could be used other purposes, but any decision would also need to fit with the overall school expansion strategy.

The panel were queried whether the service had employees or external people with the necessary skills and experience to successfully deliver the expansion of school places to meet the expected increase in demand. The Head of School Business and Support reassured the panel that the service has access to the necessary expertise internally and where necessary externally to deliver the programme. The service has successfully provided sufficient school places of high quality in the past.

The panel discussed the issue of the recommendation in the document that a school place is available within a maximum walking distance of two miles (for a child under 8 years old) and up to a maximum of three miles (for a child over 8). To ensure that pupils can access a local school and that travel times are reasonable. The panel queried when decisions are made about increasing the number of places at a school if consideration is given to any transport issues such as the frequency of bus service for children and bus routes available to them that may already be an issue before it is agreed. The Head of School Business and Support reassured the panel the travel and accessibility issues are factors that will be considered when planning for schools and explained the work done to try to ensure that pupils have access to schools within a reasonable distance. The Head of School Business and Support accepted the challenges presented to young people as a result of changes to bus service routes across the City. The ongoing challenge for the service is to have outstanding education for everybody in the City and making what is on offer at primary and secondary levels as good as it can possibly be.

The panel queried the response from schools to the issues caused by the response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact on partnership working. The Head of School Business and Support commented on the positive response from schools and the praised how well schools are working together across the City to respond to the various challenges. The Head of School Business and Support commented on the positive partnership working relationships between schools and the local authority.

The panel welcomed the report and supported the recommendations detailed in the City of Wolverhampton Education Place Planning 2020-2022' strategic policy document and refer report.

The panel wanted to place on record their congratulations to Cllr Momemabadi on her award as Young Councillor of the Year by the LGIU national award in November 2020.

Resolved:

1. The panel agreed that the minutes of the panel meeting be submitted to Cabinet for their consideration.
2. The panel agreed to receive a report on the national project which is trialling the co-location of social workers within schools to a meeting September 2021.