

Minutes of Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board

Monday, 2 August 2021 at 5.00 pm
in the Council Chamber, The Council House, Freet Street, Oldbury, B69
3DB

Present: Councillor A Shackleton (Chair)
Councillors W Gill, McVittie and K Heeley

Also present: Lesley Hagger (Director of Children and Education),
Rebecca Maher (Director of Finance/ Deputy S151 Officer)
and Sue Moore (Group Head for Education Support
Services)

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors E A Giles, Hinchliff, Hughes and Smith; K Kujawa-Sogbesan (Co-opted Member Secondary School Governor representative) C Ward-Lewis (Co-opted Member Church of England Diocese representative)

2 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest made.

3 Minutes

Minutes of the meeting held on the 15 March were agreed as a correct record.

4 Additional Items of Business

There were no additional items of business to consider.



5 Scrutiny Review - SEND Transport Models

The Executive Director of Children's Services delivered a presentation on the Council's statutory duties in relation to Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Transport, and how they are met in Sandwell.

The Local Authority had a duty and powers to make particular travel arrangements for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and to facilitate their attendance at an appropriate educational setting, as set out in the Education Act 1996, and amended by the Education and Inspections Act 2006. It was noted that the 2006 Act referred to travel rather than transport, and therefore there was a range of options available, depending on the pupil need.

Those pupils who were eligible to receive assistance with travel were those of statutory school age with SEND, whose needs or disabilities meant that they could not be expected to walk to school. All applications for Travel Assistance were considered in line with the Travel Assistance Policy 2020/21.

The travel assistance currently provided to eligible children and young people consisted of:-

- courses in independent travel training;
- travel passes for the child or young person and an accompanying adult;
- reimbursement of mileage costs to a parent/carer;
- provision of a place in a vehicle which would transport the child or young person to school.

The Council was also required to produce a Local Offer which set out the support that families and children and young people with SEND could expect in Sandwell.

Since February 2018, the provision of passenger transport services had been arranged via a Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) Framework process that was due to end on 31 July 2021. In total 122 different contracts had been delivered by 18 different operators. There were 659 pupils who currently accessed SEND transport, attending 82 Sandwell schools and 47 out of borough schools.

The overall cost of providing travel assistance (including parent mileage, travel passes and personal budgets) had increased by 45% from £3,528,000 in 2018/19 to a projected cost of £6,452,000 in 2021/22. Over the same period the number of SEND pupils who required travel assistance had increased from

680 to 850 with the average cost per pupil increasing from £5,188pa to £7,591pa. It was highlighted that this was not unique to Sandwell.

The Board received a brief presentation on the use of personal budgets. The use of personal budgets within Sandwell had begun in the summer of 2020 and was designed to help parents make their own travel arrangements. The amount of funding the parents received was based on the distance between their home and school. 140 families were currently receiving personal budgets.

The Board noted that there were currently 180 children attending 48 different settings out of borough. Children normally attended out of borough settings if their needs were such that they could only be met by that setting.

At its meeting on 16 June 2021 the Cabinet had deferred a decision to award transport contracts for 2021-2025, to be effective from 1 September 2021, pending a review (Minute No. 110/21 refers). It had subsequently been agreed that a joint review would be undertaken by the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board and the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board to identify recommendations relating to SEND Transport and the model for the provision of that service. It was noted that the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee would also be considering the procurement processes in relation to the contracts, taking into account the findings of internal and external audit reviews.

Following comments and questions from members of the Board, the following responses were made, and issues highlighted:-

- The option of personal budgets for parents who accessed SEND transport had been communicated to them in writing on two occasions. However, the service would be reaching out again to those eligible.
- The use of personal budgets was not a one size fits all approach and instead should be regarded as an alternative option.
- The use of personal budgets would continue, however there was a concern that it may increase the number of vehicles undertaking the school. How journeys operated in the future may mean considering different options such as multiple pick-ups/carshares, this however would depend on the needs of the child or young person.
- Over the summer the service would be seeking feedback from parents who had accessed personal budgets.
- The issues around budgets and increased spending a national one and recognised by government. Focusing on particular schools was not necessarily helpful.
- Allegations around modern day slavery had been investigated by national government, the police and human trafficking organisations. No modern day slavery had been identified, however poor work practices

had been discovered. Sandwell had one of the best responses to modern day slavery and was confident that the investigation had identified any issues. Those operators discovered to have poor working practices had seen additional checks and balances introduced, new contract arrangements had enabled the necessary level of quality.

- Training was being provided to operators in order for them to learn about modern slavery and understand best practice.
- A consultancy had explored alternative options around SEND transport and had engaged with parent/carers. The final report was still awaited.

The Chair of Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board had requested the findings of the internal audit review into the procurement process.

A draft scoping document for the joint review was presented to the Board for consideration.

The scoping document had been updated following comments made by members prior to the meeting. The scoping document would establish the basis for the working group.

All members present indicated their desire to participate in the working group and the Chair advised that individual work streams would be assigned.

Meeting ended at 6.20 pm

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