

Minutes of Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board

**Monday 21 March 2022 at 5.30pm
in the Council Chamber, Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

Present: Councillor Shackleton (Chair)
Councillors W Gill (Vice-Chair), E A Giles, Hinchliff, McVittie,
Millar, Smith, Webb and Co-opted Member K Heeley
(Primary School Governor Representative)

In attendance: Councillor Simms

Officers: Melanie Barnett (Group Head Inclusive Learning Services);
Sue Moore (Group Head Education Support Services);
Dawn Maleki (Youth Service Manager);
Matt Powis (Senior Democratic Services Officer) and
Connor Robinson (Democratic Services Officer).

10/22 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Chambers and Chidley and from K Kujawa-Sogbesan (Secondary School Governor representative).

11/22 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.



12/22 **Minutes**

That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 14 February 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

13/22 **Additional Item of Business**

There were no additional items of business to consider.

14/22 **Temporary Accommodation Elm Tree Primary Academy at Connor Education Centre, West Bromwich**

At a previous meeting of the Board, Members requested a report on the temporary accommodation Elm Tree Primary Academy which was due to be considered by the Cabinet.

The Group Head of Education Support Services outlined the report which sought approval for the Director of Children and Education with delegated authority, to procure and award a contract for the refurbishment of part of the Connor Education Centre to be used as a two-form entry Primary Special School for Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder, alongside other associated learning needs for one school year.

Capital funding for the refurbishment of the Connor Education Centre would be provided by the Department for Education (DfE) with the Council consent to a work funding agreement.

Elm Tree Primary Academy would provide 126 spaces for children aged 5 to 11 years old with Autistic Spectrum Disorder alongside other associated learning needs. The school was due to be opened in September 2022 with Victoria Academies Trust as the school official sponsor. Qualifying pupils were required to have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) that specified a specialist provision to be placed at the school. The first cohort of pupils to be placed at the school in September 2022 had already been considered. It was understood that Sandwell had very limited specialist places to meet the identified needs of these pupils within the 5 to 11 years age group.



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

- the location and school facilities would be fully accessible to the pupils who would be attending.
- the building assets would continue to be utilised to support those children and young people with SEND.
- discussions were ongoing about the future of the buildings following their temporary use.
- the capital cost of the project was being met by the DfE and contingencies had been worked into project costings. However, a work funding agreement was required for the project which would require the Council to accept all programme and costs risks.
- there was no waiting list for those pupils undertaking an EHCP assessment.
- it was sometimes necessary to seek out of borough provision for those with specialist and complex needs, where possible it was advantageous for children and young people with SEND to receive provision as close as possible to their home.

The Board thanked officers for their attendance.

15/22

Feedback from the SEND Operational and Strategic Boards and the Parent/Carer Forum

Group Head Inclusive Learning Services outlined the role of responsibilities of the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Operational and Strategic Boards including the Parent and Carer Forum.

The Board noted the Council's vision for children and young people with SEND which required children to :

- achieve their aspirations for a healthy ordinary life through meaningful employment and fulfilling relationships within the community of their choosing;
- have choice and control over decisions about their health, education, employment, friendships and relationships;



- successfully participate in the community and access meaningful occupation, employment and life-long learning opportunities.

Since the introduction of the SEND reforms in 2014, the number of Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP) had nearly doubled. It was noted that the Council had currently maintained over 2,800 EHCP's and the number continued to grow. Officers noted that if the population growth continued to rise, it was predicted that there could be an estimated 3,500 children or young people, in Sandwell, with an EHCP by 2025. It was stressed that the increase was not unique to Sandwell but represented a national picture.

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

- the increase in the number of assessments was a result of a recent influx of requests for assessments related to sociological and mental health difficulties presented through speech and language difficulties had been attributed to the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic most notable amongst young children. It was noted that an EHCP would not be suitable for these children and instead alternative pathways would need to be sought.
- the ability of parents to get the information they required was an ongoing challenge, the service continued to work with schools and partners to ensure parents had access to all necessary information.
- the most vulnerable children were given priority through the pandemic. Referrals continued to be investigated and those already known to the service were contacted regularly. Food parcels and learning packs had been distributed among the most vulnerable children.
- those children and young people who were electively home educated with an EHCP had increased during the Pandemic. There were 18 reported children which had increased from 14 prior to the Pandemic. It was noted that the figures had increased nationally.
- the Council continued to ensure the Board was accessible and undertakes engagement via social media and schools to increase participation.



- team capacity to undertake EHCP assessments was an ongoing challenge. The increase in service demand was not just focused on SEND but on Health and Social Care as a whole.
- the Council continued to engage schools and SENCOs to ensure that no child or young person was missing out on necessary services.
- additional resources to meet the increasing demand was an ongoing consideration for the Council.
- schools across the Borough were still recovering from the Pandemic and a significant number of teachers remained on sickness leave due to contracting Covid-19. The impact on mental health was also an ongoing concern.
- the future of the High Needs Block was both a national and local concern, though Sandwell was better placed than other neighbouring authorities the increased demand on the service would cause challenges for the Service.

16/22

Question and Answer Session with the Cabinet Member for Children Services on Youth Service Provisions

The Cabinet Member for Children’s Services had attended the Board and updated the Committee on the Youth Bus and provision across the Borough.

It was noted that the Youth Bus had been in service for 23 years and continued to undertake outreach programmes to Sandwell’s six towns and its communities. The bus had a multi-functional purpose and could be utilised as hub for community outreach programmes and general engagement activity.

Due to longevity of the Youth Bus programme, the bus was near the end of its working life. Therefore, discussions were ongoing about the replacement of the service. There were two options under consideration which included an electric or a diesel bus option. The cost of the electric bus was estimated at around £450k with a delivery time of 9 months and based at Taylors Lane, the bus would also require an additional £100k to tailor the bus to the needs of children and young people with additional equipment. In addition, the electric bus required a base and the facilities to charge the vehicle.



The options considered would be to expand the current facilities at Taylors Lane or establish a new facility with the necessary equipment at an additional cost.

The cost of a diesel bus was estimated at around £224k with a delivery timescale of 2 months. Whilst the bus would require £100k for upgrade costs there would be no new base infrastructure as required with an electric bus.

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

- it was important that the service had a mobile outreach service which allowed community engagement and inclusion.
- the necessity of a bus was questioned, and it was suggested that the funds could instead be used to enhance a mobile provision that could engage more widely with the community.
- young people's engagement with the bus and the desire for a new one was questioned and debated.
- Public Health had expressed an interest in contributing to the procurement of the bus and enable it to become multipurpose and a vehicle for health outreach.
- the electric bus would demonstrate the Councils commitment to tackling climate change and advancing the Councils 'Green Agenda'.
- the procurement of an electric bus would be 9 months, the facilities to accommodate the bus at Taylors Lane would need to be enhanced, it was envisaged that the move to electric would extend across the Council's fleet.
- it was suggested that a survey be undertaken with young people across the Borough and communities to understand what they would want from a bus and wider Youth Service provision.
- the ability for young people to travel across the Borough to access youth provision in the different towns was questioned.
- the current diesel bus was 24 years old and was unreliable.
- there were a number of community centres that deliver youth services across the six towns, the youth bus would allow the service to go out into communities that struggle or cannot access critical services.
- access to youth services would be investigated further to ensure that the six towns had inclusive access to provisions.



- The bus allowed engagement with vulnerable young people in the Borough and the service allowed outreach into the community.
- The facilities at Coneygre and Tipton Malthouse were used to engage young people.
- The HAF provided school holiday and half-term activities and food to the community and plans were in place for Easter and Summer Holidays.
- The pandemic had impacted the engagement of young people with the Youth Service.
- Youth Services Officers had been active throughout the Pandemic engaging with communities across the towns, undertaking work to prevent, ASB and youth crime.
- the Council funds a number of youth organisations which were advertised on the Councils website.
- staffing continued to be an issue within the service and there were a number of vacancies that needed to be filled.

Members thanked the Cabinet Member and officers for their attendance.

17/22 Action Tracker

The Board noted the Action Tracker

18/22 Forward Plan

The Board noted the Cabinet Forward Plan.

19/22 Work Programme

The Board noted the Work Programme.

Meeting ended at 6.41pm

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