

## EDUCATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES** of the meeting held on Wednesday, 24 June 2020 commencing at 1.00 pm and finishing at 3.00 pm.

**Present:**

**Voting Members:** Councillor Michael Waine – in the Chair  
Councillor John Howson (Deputy Chairman)  
Councillor Mrs Anda Fitzgerald-O'Connor  
Councillor Jeannette Matelot  
Councillor Gill Sanders  
Councillor Emma Turnbull  
Councillor Hilary Hibbert-Biles (in place of Councillor Ted Fenton)

**Other Members in Attendance:** Councillor Lorraine Lindsay-Gale

**By Invitation:** Mr Donald McEwan, Council of Oxfordshire Teachers' Organisation (COTO) and Mrs Carole Thomson, Oxfordshire Governors' Association.

**Officers:**

Whole of meeting (Interim) Corporate Director for Children's Services, Jane Portman, Deputy Director Education, Hayley Good, Deputy Director Education, Mr Chris Hilliard, Deborah Bell, Kim James; Robin Rogers and Deborah Miller.

**Agenda Item                      Officer Attending**

*The Scrutiny Committee considered the matters, reports and recommendations contained or referred to in the agenda for the meeting and agreed as set out below. Copies of the agenda and reports are attached to the signed Minutes.*

**11/20 INTRODUCTION AND WELCOME**

(Agenda No. 1)

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the first virtual Meeting of the Education Scrutiny Committee and in particular Jane Portman, Interim Director of Children's Services and Hayley Good, Deputy Director of Education.

**12/20 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS**

(Agenda No. 2)

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Ted Fenton (Councillor Hilary Hibbert-Biles).

## **13/20 MINUTES** (Agenda No. 4)

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 5 February 2020 were approved and signed as an accurate record of the Meeting, subject to page 4, minute 4/20 substitute 'forum' with organisation and page 8, minute 10/20, substitute 'Acadamies' with 'Academies'.

### Matters Arising

Minute 3/20, in relation to the timetable set out in the minutes, Councillor John Howson asked whether the timetable was going to be kept in relation to COVID 19 and whether officers could provide an update on how deprived and disadvantage children would be represented on the Strategic Board?

Mr Chris Hilliard, Consultant Deputy Director for Education reported that a consultation had taken place earlier in the year, and the outcome now needed to be looked at and a draft would be prepared for September. In relation to how deprived and disadvantaged children would be represented he explained that it would be the responsibility of all those round the table to represent those children. A report with a strategic plan would be going to Cabinet in September/October.

The Chairman requested that the Committee see the report prior to it going to Cabinet.

In relation to Minute 6/20, Councillor Howson reported that there was now details on the government interactive tool information about average progress 8 per pupil. There had been a significant rebound in both pupils with free school meals where Oxfordshire were now performing in 2019 better than any of the statistical neighbours and that those not on free school meals were performing better than the South East and the County's statistical neighbours.

The Chairman asked that the Committee's congratulations be communicated to schools on the work they have put in.

In relation to Minute 6/20 the Chairman and Councillor John Howson drew the Committee's attention to the high number of wards that fell within some of the most deprived wards, particularly Oxford East, with needed to be recognised in terms of funding.

The Chairman requested a meeting with the Cabinet Member for Education & Cultural Services and relevant officers to pursue this matter to make South East Oxford as an opportunity area.

The Cabinet Member agreed to the request.

## **14/20 A LEARNER ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY FOR OXFORDSHIRE** (Agenda No. 6)

The Committee had before it the Learner Engagement Strategy which had been co-produced by key stake holders and partners engaged in optimising the inclusion in education of all Oxfordshire's statutory school aged children. The purpose of the Strategy was to ensure that children accessed their full educational entitlement to enable them to thrive as adults and fully participate in the economic, learning, personal and social life of Oxfordshire.

Mr Hilliard, Consultant Deputy Director of Education reported in relation to COVID 19 that officers had continued to operate across the four service areas from the moment lockdown began using the business continuity plan. A school brokering service and early years team were put in place immediately so if people with vulnerable children or key worker children were having difficulty placing their children, they were able to help.

Looking at the bigger picture, an important decision taken early on was to provide personal protective equipment (PPE) for all schools which had had a significant impact on school confidence in opening to provide for vulnerable children and key worker children and then opening up further to other groups. They were acutely aware that they were one education Services across all ages and therefore had made a grant available for PPE for nurseries and childminders etc, encouraging those organisations to keep going and provide support.

Weekly meetings had been carried out with the Department for Education and Ofsted throughout the crisis enabling officers to feed back the position on Oxfordshire which early indications show had been very positive. Officers had received a wealth of support from Senior Officers and Members.

Mr Chris Hilliard, highlighted the services' response as follows:

#### Education

- All Children's Education Services (Learner Engagement, Special Educational Needs, Access to Learning and School improvement and Learning) had been fully operational during the lockdown period.
- Staffing had been shared internally across the four service areas to enable the teams to continue to deliver and set up new work streams e.g. the 'School Places Brokering Service' and the Early Years Teams which had run the EY places brokering service mainly through the Family Information Service.
- A grant had been provided to early years providers for the purchase of PPE. All schools were provided with Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for staff when their local supplies had limited access to PPE.
- The team had liaised with the Department for Education (DfE) on a weekly basis and Ofsted throughout the pandemic.
- There had been clear support and challenge for education officers from the Cabinet Member, the Interim Director of Children's Services and other councillors.

#### Transport

Home to School Transport teams were working hard to ensure sufficient transport was in place for when more pupils return to school in accordance with government guidelines.

### Admissions

The main admissions round for Reception Year, Year 7 and Year 10 in September 2021 had been completed on time. There were high levels of appeals daily to address the backlog and support children being in school in September.

### Early Years

Early Years providers (childminders, preschools, day nurseries and nursery schools) had remained open for vulnerable children and children of Key Workers. Approximately 60% of providers were currently open across the county with more opening daily.

### Schools

- All schools had remained open throughout the period to children of 'Critical workers' and those deemed vulnerable. During the lockdown, only 5% of schools had closed due to staffing shortages; mostly for less than two days. Where a school was closed for a brief period, all families requesting a place for their child in another school had been placed by newly formed 'School Places Brokering Service.'
- Weekly 'virtual' meetings had been held with Headteachers to support them with the phased expansion of places in schools and offer support and practical advice; most recently Public Health colleagues had attended those meetings.
- Practical written advice through documents, frameworks and Frequently Asked Questions sheets had been offered to all schools irrespective of status.
- Since the 1st June primary schools had expanded their offer to include children in Year R, 1 and 6. From 16 June 2020 primary schools can, if they had the capacity (space and staffing) widen their offer to other Year groups.

### Vulnerable Learners and SEND

Children's Social Care and other Education service colleagues had worked together with schools to ensure that when children were not in school, the absence was followed up and appropriate safeguards were put in place. Attendance had been monitored daily.

### IT Equipment for Schools

The Department for Education had offered to provide digital devices and internet access for disadvantaged families, children and young people who did not currently

have access to them through another source, such as their school. Digital devices could be requested for:

- care leavers
- children and young people aged 0 to 19 with a social worker
- disadvantaged year 10 pupils

It was hoped to have equipment in schools by the end of this month and officers would be asking schools to ensure appropriate links to school IT platforms.

Deborah Bell, Head of Learner Engagement reported that she hoped that the report and the Learner Engagement Strategy articulated just how widespread representation on the Board was. It had been expanded to merge with the early help board to include case capacity. There was very strong representation from all schools, including Governors and Health and Police were also very heavily involved. Inclusion and Learner Engagement was ever bodies business.

COVID 19 had presented many challenges and as a result a task and finish group had been set up to look at what the primary challenges would be of pupils returning to school in a phased manner. As a consequence, support web pages had been made available from 1<sup>st</sup> June and had received over 10,000 hits so far. Feedback had been positive from all partners that the resource had been widely used. The benefit of having an online resource, was that officers were able to update it daily, as it was still a very fast-moving situation and it had avoided sending further emails to head teachers who were deluged with information.

The stabilisation of Elective Home Education rates had been achieved. Many parents had decided to electively home educated their children before Whitehall closed schools officially and she was anticipating locally and nationally that many parents would have had a positive experience educating from home and would continue to exercise that right and preference going forward. During the last few months, learner Engagement had contacted every electively home educated families that they were aware of to check that they were happy with their decision. This had been a useful exercise in enabling the service to see where families needed support.

There had been no exclusions since school closures in March. However, there had been 3 schools in the County who had sought to permanently exclude 3 children from the vulnerable cohort. This outcome had been avoided by negotiation and offering alternatives.

She further reported that staff from Learner Engagement and other services within the Council had contributed to research being led by Professor Harry Daniels through the Excluded Lives piece of work being carried out by the Institute for Education at Oxford University who had published a report on the impact of COVID 19 on Children's Education. The report had identified that the biggest risk of this period of school closure, would be on children's wellbeing and emotional health and that was very much the focus of work moving forward.

The Chairman commented that he had been very comforted and proud of what had been achieved by the Council and the Department over the last few months. School had been taken aback by the gift of PEE and that it was a tremendous initiative. He

also commented on the very positive effective of all schools coming together, which had not happened for many years. The partnership meeting had been very welcome and there had been extensive collaboration. He further wished to dispel the myth that schoolteachers had not been working during the period and thanked schools for all they had done.

Councillor John Howson reiterated the points made by the Chairman adding he thanks to all school staff including Governors. He lamented the fact that Oxfordshire were not able to offer IT equipment for all schools in the same way. He questioned whether officers had any local information to go with the national information regarding the proportion of reception and year 6 had been attending?

Chris Hilliard undertook to provide the attendance information to members outside of the Meeting. He further reported that the Council had bid on behalf of all children, irrespective of status of schools from 0-19 with a social worker of a care leaver for IT (laptops and routers). There was only a separate process for academies for year 10 and there understanding had been that there had been a positive outcome. The Chairman requested that officers provide information to the Committee on what IT had been awarded.

Deborah Bell indicated that she had locality data that showed that Oxford City attendance had been exceptionally good during the crisis period. Nationally it was 2.7% and Oxford City had double that for vulnerable children. Didcot and Banbury had also done very well. Kim James added that some schools had got all year groups back but that some schools were challenged geographically and just didn't have the space and some schools had staffing issues due to staff shielding and some schools where parents had decided not to send their children back to school. There had been amazing attendance figures at individual schools.

Donald McEwan added his thanks form COTO for the collaborative working, during the period, finding local solutions to the National problem. He further reiterated his thanks for the PPE deliveries and for the local partnership heads meetings. In relation to the mental health and nurturing side for children he reported that COTO would wish to see a reduced curriculum rather than a catch-up curriculum model to reduce pressure on children returning.

Councillor Turnbull questioned what had been done to encourage children to return to school in the year groups that were able to attend as numbers seemed to be low both nationally and locally and particularly what assurances had been given to parents around safety and also what plans around comms were going to go out over the summer to reassure parents who were still scared for September and whether apart from PEE whether there were any other interventions for vulnerable staff?

Mr Hilliard responded that the priority had been the children from key workers and vulnerable children and many schools were filled up with those groups. Kim James in relation to reassuring parents, reported that for early years they had the family information service and everything was going through that route. They were also putting messages out through the OCC media routes. Officers were also working closely with public health who had written a letter to all Heads to share with parents to get those messages out.

In terms of staff, she reported that they had risk assessments which were available to schools for a whole range of individual needs. They were encouraging schools to use them, and the message was going out via school's news. They also had the OCC Health & Safety Team and PamAssist. It was different for academies if they hadn't bought into OCC HR, but they were a whole range of professional organisations offering support and advice. The risk Assessment was key to ensure things were in place.

Deborah Bell reported that operationally, a daily localised multi-agency network virtual meeting had been held created and schools were invited to bring children and families they were concerned about in relation to returning to school, which (with parent's consent) provided an opportunity for partners to come together and talk about individual case work that may be necessary particular concerns. In terms of staff well being and safety, there were also resources available through the return to school web pages and the parent carer forum had received the link for the web pages resources and had distributed it widely.

Councillor Lorraine Lindsay-Gale, Cabinet Member for Education & Cultural Services added that there had been no cases in Oxfordshire schools and expressed her frustration that parents were not of aware of that fact. She had spoken with the Director of Public Health with a plea to send out encouraging messages about returning to school. It was of the utmost important to get children back to school as soon as possible.

Donald McEwan welcomed the phased returned which had allowed schools to put procedures in place and try and test them before allowing more children into school. He reported that there had been a small number of cases in Oxfordshire schools but agreed that they had not caught it from school and had not passed it on.

The Committee made the following points during debate:

The Committee noted that all the statistics in the Learner Engagement Strategy related to 2015/2016 and needed to be update. The Committee noted that this was due to happen in July.

The Committee welcomed the 3 pupils not being permanently excluded during lockdown and wondered if lessons learnt could be carried forward in the future. Deborah Bell commented that moving forward she would expect to see more applications for flexible schooling arrangements and ways of working for children. There was now a multi-agency strategic board in place for exclusions.

The Committee noted that the Learner Engagement Strategic Board accesses performance against data at the end of each academic year, which was then reported to the Education Senior Management Team and the Children's Trust and the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children's Board.

The Chairman expressed the need to understand the distribution of exclusions across the County to see if it was area based. The Chairman further noted that there

was a paper on the high needs block funding and that the Committee would wish to pre-scrutinise that report.

The Chairman thanked officers for their work and commended the joint working around the crisis.

## **15/20 FORWARD PLAN AND COMMITTEE BUSINESS**

(Agenda No. 7)

The Committee considered the forward plan and **AGREED** the business for September 2020 as set out in the report and that the Chairman and Vice Chairman, together with officers would manage the business on the current work programme for the efficient running of the Committee, subject to the following:

The Learner Engagement Strategy being added (if available); and

Agreement to hold an extraordinary Meeting in September to consider the report on High Needs Block prior to consideration by the Cabinet; and

Adding a (verbal) update report in January on how the return to school in September 2020 went, followed by a written report in the Autumn.

## **16/20 UPDATE ON THE IMPACT OF WORK ON REDUCING EXCLUSIONS**

(Agenda No. 8)

Exclusions in Oxfordshire had been a cause for concern to Members, Officers, Parents, the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Board and Children's Trust for several years. Education Scrutiny Committee had carried out a deep dive investigation into the issues in 2018. Accordingly, Education Scrutiny Committee had before it a report which provided an update on the current position of School Exclusions in Oxfordshire.

Deborah Bell, in introducing the report explained that at the beginning of the academic year 2019/20, there was a rapid increase of permanent exclusions which was of great concern, whilst that rate of increase had slowed down and stabilised, it was still in an upward trajectory and Oxfordshire, if COVID had not happened would have seen a very worrying figure by the end of the year.

Since writing the report, the figure had further reduced and now stood at 68, as 5 of the numbers had been rescinded. There had however, been an increase in primary exclusions, especially for those with special educational needs and disabilities, and there was work being undertaken to address this particular cohort.

At primary school, those most excluded were boys 87% reducing in secondary to 59%. In Oxfordshire there was a disproportioned excluding of children with SEN support which was higher than the national position. The main reason for exclusion was persistent disruptive behaviour, followed by verbal abuse or threatening



behaviour against an adult. The reasons were proving to be subjective, with what one school would find acceptable another school excluding for. There had been a lot of work carried out at Senior Officer and Officer level, with regard to the increase in trend and a new officer post had been funded out of existing funds to provide a response to schools when they were at the end of their tether, and this had gone a long way to slow down the increase in trend.

They had also created a multi-agency task and finish group which had created a behaviour pathway that schools are now expected to follow before they exclude a child which wraps in the need for an early help assessment which takes account of societal or family needs and assessment of any SEN which were unmet.

Conversations around inclusive cultures and ethical leadership were routinely held with heads and chairs. Restorative practice had been adopted and was currently being rolled out to all schools across the County and they had managed to adapt the training to an online offer. They were already seeing very positive outcomes in those schools that had received an embedded the training.

The Committee made the following points during debate:

The Committee noted that a reason cited by the schools for exclusion was insufficient SEN provision in the County and a lack of affordable alternative provision. The Chairman noted that this issue was likely to come up in the joint work to be undertaken with the Performance Scrutiny Committee.

Deborah Bell reminded members of the large piece of work being undertaken to look at alternative provision, together with the joint commissioning work underway. The special school estate was also being expanded.

Jane Portman, Interim Director for Children's Services reported that 2 new special schools were due to be built, one in the north and one in the south and an expansion project for the old Northfield School which was now the Ryan Academy.

The Committee queried whether there was enough CPD available and whether schools were doing all they could and whether adequate training was provided for school staff on how to address persistent disruptive behaviour, particularly from an early age so that it did escalate further up the schools.

Deborah Bell responded that there was a rich breadth of CPD available for schools to support teachers' response to behaviour. All of it cost money both internally and externally and there were a lot of conflicting demands on school's shrinking budgets. She gave an assurance that her team advocated wherever possible.

The Committee queried of the permanent exclusions, how many were children who already had a second fresh start and how many were excluded without an In-year fair access panel. Deborah Bell undertook to provide that information to the Committee.

The Chairman asked whether they could receive trend data over the past two or three years so that it could established whether individual schools and academies were high excluding schools or whether it was a blip to their normal practice.

Councillor Howson expressed the importance of keeping exclusions under review so that a constant overview and monitoring could be undertaken on the effects of issues such as academisation and the national school funding formula to ensure that it was not disadvantaging some children.

Deborah Bell confirmed that Oxfordshire remained comfortably under the national average for exclusions.

The Chairman thanked Deborah Bell for her report.

**17/20 EXEMPT ITEM**

(Agenda No. 9)

*The Committee RESOLVED that the public be excluded for item 10 in the Agenda since it is likely that if they were present during that part of the meeting there would be disclosure of exempt information as defined in Part I of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended) and specified in relation to the respective item in the Agenda and since it was considered that, in all the circumstances of each case, the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information.*

**THE REPORT RELATING TO THE EXEMPT ITEM HAD NOT BEEN MADE PUBLIC AND SHOULD BE REGARDED AS STRICTLY PRIVATE TO MEMBERS AND OFFICERS ENTITLED TO RECEIVE IT.**

**18/20 SCHOOL EXCLUSIONS IN OXFORDSHIRE**

(Agenda No. 10)

*The information contained in the report was exempt in that it fell within the following prescribed category:*

*2 Information which was likely to reveal the identity of an individual*

*It was considered that in this case the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information, in that such disclosure would infringe the rights of the individual to privacy contrary to the general law and the duty of the authority to respect human rights and to comply with that law.*

This item was taken at item 8.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing .....