

Coventry City Council
Minutes of the Meeting of Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2)
held at 10.00 am on Thursday, 18 April 2024

Present:

Members: Councillor CE Thomas (Chair)
Councillor S Keough
Councillor R Lancaster
Councillor A Masih
Councillor M Mutton - substitute for Cllr A Tucker
Councillor S Nazir
Councillor E M Reeves

Co-Opted Members: Mrs S Hanson, Mr D Jackson and Mr G Vohra

Other Members (by invitation): Councillor Dr K Sandhu (Cabinet Member for Education and Children's Services)
Councillor P Seaman (Cabinet Member for Children and Young People)

Employees (by Service Area):

Children's Services N MacDonald (Interim Director)

Education and Skills R Sugars (Director), J Essex, C Webb

Law and Governance G Holmes, T Robinson

Apologies: Councillors J Blundell, T Khan, and A Tucker

Public Business

33. Declarations of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

34. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 1st February 2024 were agreed and signed as a true record.

Further to Minute 30, Mr D Jackson (Co-opted Member) raised a question regarding the root causes and process for the permanent exclusion of pupils on EHCPs (Education Health and Care Plans) with children on plans very rarely excluded except under circumstances of prolonged violent behaviour.

35. School Admissions and School Sufficiency

The Board considered a briefing note and comprehensive presentation of the Director for Education and Skills which provided an update on the current process and position in relation to School Admissions and Sufficiency and outlined actions in place to respond to sufficiency challenges.

Under Section 14 of the Education Act 1996, Coventry City Council has a statutory duty to ensure sufficient school places and fair, appropriate access to education. It is the Council's role to plan, commission and organise school places in a way that raises standards, manages supply and demand.

The Coventry One Strategic Plan, first presented to Council on 2nd October 2018, and annually thereafter, with the most recent report on the 13th of February 2024, set out the city pupil forecasts for special, primary, and secondary, broken down across planning areas. It outlined the capital funding strategy proposed by the Local Authority and the Coventry Education Partnership to respond to rising or falling pupil cohorts across the City and provide additional school places required between 2023- 2027.

The briefing note highlighted that school places within the city are allocated by the City Council's School Admissions team. The Local Authority (LA) has the following statutory duties in relation to School Admissions:

- to determine and administer the admission arrangements for community schools.
- to determine an annual co-ordinated scheme for reception and transfers for all schools and academies in the city.
- to co-ordinate the annual admissions process for reception and transfers (normal intake year) including receipt of every application, exchange of information with other admission authorities including other LAs, resulting in the communication of a single offer of a school place to a parent.
- the LA's co-ordination responsibility begins from the launch of the application process in September (including compilation and statutory publication of an annual prospectus) until the end of the summer term before admission to school, therefore includes communication of any subsequent offers from waiting lists.
- to advise parents about applying for schools in-year, to provide parents with information about which schools have places, and to provide a common application form.
- To work alongside the Fair Access Protocol team to ensure that vulnerable children, and those who are having difficulty in securing a school place in-year, are allocated a school place as quickly as possible, minimising the time the child is out of school.
- We also have a duty to ensure that every child is receiving a suitable fulltime education so monitor the outcome of every application.

Admissions officers receive all applications from Coventry residents applying for a school place. They handle the intake, processing, evaluation, and determinations of submitted applications. They verify the accuracy of information and confirm that application packages are complete and contain all details relevant to the application – Baptism certificates, details on any siblings already at the preference school. They ensure adherence to all regulations and department policies, with specific reference to the school admission code.

The City Council receive applications through two different processes – these are the co-ordinated process and the in-year process.

- Co-ordinated process: for pupils applying for Reception and Year 7 places for schools to transfer between phases of education. Applications for this process are received between 1st September and 31st October (Secondary) and 15th January (Primary). In all around 8000 applications are received per year for this process, this figure has been fairly consistent over the past few years but has slowly increased.
- In-year process: for pupils applying for all other year groups or for newly arrived pupils to the city who are of statutory school age in need of a school place. The City Council administers in-year admissions for all schools in Coventry. Over the past 2/3 years Coventry has experienced significant changes in its in-year pupil demographics. Despite a lower birth cohort moving through primary the total statutory school cohort (i.e. not including sixth form and nursery provision) has increased from 52,095 in Jan 2022 to 53,636 in Jan 2024, as a result of in-year migration from new arrivals to Coventry (from either overseas or other parts of the country).

As outlined in the note, there is a robust pupil place planning process in place which uses birth rate, and new housing development information to estimate pupil numbers and plan where school places increase and decrease. Net growth in in-year migration is much harder to estimate and has not needed to be factored in previously – Coventry has traditionally seen a high number of in-year applications, but with an equal amount of migration out of the city. To address this unexpected issue pupil number forecasts have been adapted to include higher levels of in-year migration and the strategy to ensure adequate school place provision across the city is to implement additional classes (temporary and permanent) to create additional learning spaces without overburdening schools or compromising the quality of education.

Alongside the presentation, officers emphasised the service area's ability to function effectively under increasing demands and challenges, especially in relation to SEND provision. They stated that while the SEND landscape continues to not work for everyone, new efforts to help those most vulnerable have become key sources of hope and achievement. For example, newly opened Enhanced Resource Provisions (ERPs) in the city have received outstanding Ofsted ratings, demonstrating that the service is still providing an excellent service even under current pressures.

The Board questioned Officers and received responses on a number of matters relating to the School Admissions and School Sufficiency:

- School place provision when families move out of a catchment area.
- Estimations and forecasts for school admissions following housing developments – section 106 agreements as part of planning developments to accommodate for school admissions.
- The reasons behind the previously cancelled Bannerbrook School Development.
- Causes of 'bulge' classes and the likelihood on continuing 'bulge' classes next year.

- Reasons for the influx of in-year school admissions in Coventry – what areas of the city have been most effected by in-year migration and how are these areas being targeted?
- The process for a child awaiting a diagnosis for a referral for a SEND school but currently attending a mainstream school – not needing a diagnosis for a referral to a SEND school.
- ‘Bulge’ classes being a knock-on impact of the pandemic.
- The increased number of SEND admissions being a direct result of better methods of identifying SEND need and provision.
- Assessment waiting lists for children on a EHCP (Education Health and Care Plan) and the appeal process for those not given an EHCP.
 - Note: Coventry Council does not use assessment waiting lists for EHCPs and conducts a statutory assessment within the 6-week legal timeframe. Although the service has often been able to deliver the plan within the 20-week deadline, recent increased demand for assessments has reduced delivery within the 20-week period locally and nationally.
- Early identification frameworks for SEND children in nurseries and the support provided.
- Early years strategy and the support provided.
- Neurodevelopmental assessment diagnosis waiting times.
- The process for refusing a school place, statutory duties around children missing education, and the Fair Access Protocol.
- Whittle Academy’s Enhanced Resource Provision (ERP) Ofsted rating and the hugely beneficial impact the provision will have on children.
- The support schools will receive in terms of revenue and expenditure for ‘bulge’ classes and the aftereffects of ‘bulge’ classes for schools.
- Temporary ‘satellite schools’ as an alternative to ‘bulge’ classes – assisting schools by offering up council land to erect temporary buildings for ‘bulge’ classes.
- How is data captured for new housing developments and added to our current forecasts? Do we have projections beyond 2024 and will school admissions continue to grow beyond that?
- Home education and the impact on future forecast data.
- Forewarning to increasing refugee in-year school admissions – forecasting challenges between pre-approved plans and wider migration.
- Parents submitting school appeal applications for SEND schools without advice, guidance or mediation.
- Capability for staff to transfer from one school to another to help with increased admission demand.

The Board gave their thanks to officers for their continued hard work and for raising some of the key challenges the service area has been facing.

The Cabinet Member for Education and Skills further reiterated her thanks to officers and highlighted that today’s exploration into school admissions and sufficiency is a complex and ever-changing picture. Additionally, she welcomed the challenges the Board highlighted and expressed her desire to return the issue to the Board at a later date to discuss progress.

The Interim Director of Children's Services finalised the thanks by commending officer colleagues for a comprehensive overview of challenges and provision and lastly drew the Board's attention to the service area's position with regard to working around the high needs block of the DSG (Dedicated Schools Grant). In summary, Coventry's maintenance of a DSG surplus in comparison to a national DSG deficit is a key sign of progress and success.

RESOLVED that the Board:

- 1) Notes the current sufficiency challenges in relation to school place planning.**
- 2) Notes the steps being undertaken to sustaining availability of places.**

36. Work Programme and Outstanding Issues

The Board noted the Work Programme with the agreement that the following item be added to the items for noting in the Work Programme for 2024/25:

- SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) and Early Years Provision

37. Any Other Business

Any other items of business which the Chair decides to take as matters of urgency because of the special circumstances involved.

(Meeting closed at 11.55 am)