

FULL COUNCIL

2 FEBRUARY 2021

REPORT OF CABINET MEMBER FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES, EDUCATION AND SKILLS

1. COUNCIL UPDATE REGARDING DECISIONS

1.1 Purpose of Report

1.2 To advise Members that a decision making session was held remotely by video meeting on 11th January 2021

1.3 Background

1.3.1 This report highlights some of those decisions which have been made, but not all. Member <http://eservices.solihull.gov.uk/mgInternet/mgListCommittees.aspx?bcr=1>

1.3.2 Attached to this report is a list of decisions made.

1.4 Decisions

1.4.1 At the meeting on 11th January 2021 I approved the Schools Admissions and Qualifying Scheme arrangements for September 2022-23 in respect of Solihull Community and Voluntary Controlled Schools. This details the process for managing allocation of places and qualifying priority arrangements and is reviewed each year as required by national regulations. Academies, Voluntary Aided Schools and the 14-19 University Technical College are their own Admissions Authorities but all take part in the Local authority Coordinated Scheme, subject to their Funding Agreement and comply with the Schools Admissions Code. No changes were proposed to the existing scheme as the current arrangements are working well. Families in Solihull are well served, with 98% of pupils being offered a place at one of their preferred schools and between 80% and 94% getting their first preference, depending on the type of school.

1.4.2 The main agenda item for consideration was a report on the initial consultation regarding the proposed expansion of Cheswick Green Primary School to accommodate children from the housing developments at Dairy Mount Farm within the village and Blythe Valley. The council has a statutory to ensure that sufficient school places for all children within the borough and as Members will be aware, Councils do not have the power to establish new schools, as these requires DfE approval and must be an Academy or Free Schools operated by approved sponsors. As set out in my report to council in December, following failure to receive DfE approval by a sponsor for a Free School application at Blythe Valley, a feasibility study concluded that Cheswick Green is the only school within a reasonable distance that has scope to expand and where the site can accommodate extension of buildings.

1.4.3 The consultation responses generally expressed concerns about the impact of additional traffic and exacerbation of parking problems in the vicinity of the school. As a former governor of Cheswick Green School I understand these concerns, which are community infrastructure issues rather than educational. In the circumstances I approved the recommendation to proceed to the next formal stage but made clear that comprehensive plans for provision of car parking and school transport arrangements must be brought forward before final approval of the expansion and the necessary planning application.

1.5 Council Plan and Priorities

1.5.1 The policies, current services and future plans are all designed to support the council Plan and its priorities for children, young people and families, with a particular focus on ensuring equality of opportunity and meeting the needs of vulnerable children and disadvantaged groups.

1.6 Good News and Issues of Interest

- 1.6.1** Members will be aware that in the face of the challenges, restrictions and pressures of the Coronavirus emergency our staff across all departments have been outstanding in their commitment, loyalty, innovation and flexibility in order to maintain essential services and support our communities. Education has been an area of national focus and we have been working closely with schools and families to ensure that children continue to receive education and remain safe. The success of the Solihull approach had already been acknowledged by the regional Schools Commissioner and now by the Cabinet Office which requested a discussion with our officers and representative Headteachers to understand how we have developed such an effective and supportive approach to what is a very complex and demanding issue. This is a tribute to the leadership and creative working of our staff, the excellent relationship developed with Heads and Governors and the political support that has ensured that children and young people receive the best possible service and teaching staff are equipped to deliver education both within schools and through distance learning.
- 1.6.2** With the increased number of children now in care since the Covid19 restrictions came into place nearly a year ago (523 at the time of writing) our Foster Carers are more important than ever. I am delighted that our Public Health Team has arranged for them to be offered early Coronavirus vaccination and this has been really well received. It was quite moving to read a letter of thanks from one of our longest-serving foster parent couples who have provided such valuable care and support to many children over the years.
- 1.6.3** One of the increasing concerns from the pandemic is the effect on employment prospects, especially those for young people. Through our Skills Directorate we have a number of programmes relating to training and employment as part of the oversight of school leavers and particularly those at risk of becoming NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training). Some are currently funded through the European Social and Employment Fund and subject to approval by the Department of Work and Pensions. I am pleased to confirm that all our pipeline ESFEF projects have now been approved and will provide a comprehensive range of activity and support until December 2023 and the approval also provides greater financial stability for our Employment and Skills Team.
- 1.6.4** The programmes include support for 15-21 year olds, especially 1-1 work young people at risk of offending and also with care experienced young people; support for those aged 15-29 identified as NEET to progress into employment, education or training; targeted and intensive support for those with Learning Difficulty or Disability to help them towards employment and there is also a programme to support people aged 30+ who are further from the labour market to move into employment.
- 1.6.5** Our current performance with the current Year 12 young people is quite impressive as 97% are already meeting the expectation to participate. The remaining 3% includes some that have specific reasons for being unable to fully engage (health, etc.) or who cannot be contacted.
- 1.6.6** A report on Corporate Parenting was considered at the recent Health and Wellbeing Board and included reference to the Christmas appeal that I highlighted at the December council. It was organised through a 'Just Giving' appeal on behalf of OVOS (Children in Care Council) to raise funds so that every young person in our care would receive a gift voucher for Christmas. An ambitious target of £3,000 was set but the appeal remarkably raised over £4,400. Thanks to members and staff from across the council for the generous donations that helped to bring some Christmas cheer to so many children and young people.

1.6.7 As part of the developing concept of Corporate Parenting we are inviting organisations to participate and the Lions Club of Solihull and Shirley Round Table have kindly made substantial donations to support OVOS. We have also forged partnerships with University Hospital Birmingham and the Sir Josiah Mason Trust to benefit our corporate children, whilst a stationery supplier to the council has donated packs of its products to support young people going on to college or university. We can all help to raise awareness through the organisations, partners or employers with which we are involved. For example, I obtained funding for basic skills mentoring from a charity board on which I sit and also a significant donation to OVOS following a talk I gave to a local organisation, so there is something each one of us can do to demonstrate our commitment to our corporate parent role. The Just Giving facility remains active for donations (https://www.justgiving.com/crowdfunding/ovos-solihull?utm_term=jbJ39pmrJ) and Yvonne Obady (yobaidy@solihull.gov.uk) can provide further information or support in developing corporate parenting offers.

1.7 Future Decisions

1.7.1 A discussion paper on Reshaping Education in Solihull has been circulated to school and other partners. This is part of the developing partnership relationship across the local educational community and other stakeholder groups and is likely to influence future arrangements and scope of services over coming years. We will also need to review the range of issues that schools, colleges and universities identify as they reflect on the effect of the Covid pandemic on learning and for Children's Services, the implications and lessons learned from the impact of the lockdown periods on the wellbeing of children and young people and on school and social care staff.

1.7.2 No doubt there will be national developments and policy decisions that will affect services for children and responsibilities of local authorities. We will ensure that we keep abreast of possible changes and respond to consultations, as well as working with the Local Government Association and other representative bodies.