

## SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT FORUM

Thursday 22 June 2023

Present (virtually): Councillor Amy Tisi, Neil Knowles (Vice-Chair) and Mark Wilson

Officers (virtually): Laurence Ellis, Kelly Nash, Alasdair Whitelaw, Claire Murray and David Griffiths

### Apologies

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. Forum members then introduced themselves.

No apologies were received.

### Declarations of Interest

Councillor Wilson declared that he was co-chair of the Governors at the Windsor Boys' School.

### Minutes

**RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the minutes of the meeting held on 6<sup>th</sup> February 2023 were approved as a true and accurate record.**

### Pupil Premium update and Quality First Teaching Programme

*(Councillor Knowles joined the meeting virtually at 5:08pm)*

Claire Murray, School Improvement Manager (AfC), explained that the Pupil Premium and disadvantage gap was a major national issue and had been a major target for RBWM for a number of years. She stated that RBWM was a high achieving education authority, and this had meant that the gap in RBWM was quite large.

From the published national data from last summer 2022, Claire Murray conveyed that the GCSE disadvantage gap had been the widest in 10 years (since 2011-12), primarily caused by the Covid pandemic, but the Borough was making progress in closing the gap. With Key Stage 2 (KS2), the Primary KS2 national gap had been the widest in 10 years with just 43% of poorer pupils having reached 'expected standard' nationally. Writing had fallen alongside maths, with the proportion of disadvantaged pupils meeting the 'expected standard' having dropped from 67% to 56%, compared to 84% to 78% among non-disadvantaged pupils nationally.

Claire Murray informed that RBWM was following the same national trend with phonics, whereby performance standards of disadvantaged pupils in the Borough had fallen by 9% in contrast to non-disadvantaged pupils which had fallen by 4%. This trend applied to both KS1 and KS2 in RBWM while also being below the national average in some areas.

Claire Murray then explained how RBWM was seeking to rectify this. One method was the Pupil Premium networks where primary and secondary schools in the Borough meet at least three times a year to share strategies and ideas. She informed that RBWM had pockets of deprivation whereby some schools had high levels of deprivation than others, which could sometimes make looking at strategies very difficult.

The national government, Claire Murray explained, had introduced Pupil Premium funding in 2022 for schools, in which schools were then required to formulate a three-year strategy to manage the funding and make improvements to disadvantaged pupils. As part of this, all schools had to record on their website and present to their governing bodies and local authority their approaches in implementing their strategy. These could include high-quality teaching, targeted academic support, and wider strategies. Claire Murray added that the Borough had taken forward the high-quality teaching strategy, elaborating that all research stated that quality teaching was the most effective method in narrowing the disadvantage gap.

Claire Murray then stated that the Borough was implementing a year-long project but had also signed up to the three-year Pupil Premium. The strategy involved training teachers to become instructional coaches on a vast array of teaching and learning strategies, which had proven to be very successful. 32 RBWM schools had become part of the project. The Borough was also working with Tom Sherrington, an educational guru from the Walkthrus Project, who had given educational advice to schools across the UK.

Claire Murray reiterated that instructional coaching was the most effective method to support and develop teaching staff. This would involve experts working with teachers in regular one-to-one sessions ensuring through a coaching model to improve teacher knowledge and therefore every lesson was effective as it could be, resulting in improved pupil achievement. Training and meeting had been arranged for every month until March 2024. Claire Murray hoped the year-long Borough-wide strategy and three-year Pupil Premium strategy would be effective.

The Chair asked Claire Murray if there were any schools which had not signed up to the strategy alongside the 32 other schools but believed that they should. Claire Murray replied that there were two schools in which the Borough was conducting some final negotiations, adding that it was not too late to join.

Councillor Wilson asked whether the training approach was an instructional coaching package for all teachers as well as whether it was designed to give extra guidance to teachers who might be perceived as not-so-qualified. Claire Murray replied that the school decided how they organised the training and that the training was designed for all levels of skill. For example, behavioural walkthroughs to improve class behaviour, such as common languages and questioning methods. Essentially, the training was needs-based, driven by the school.

Councillor Wilson then asked what the approach was for teaching assistants. Claire Murray replied that the training was open to all school staff in which they would have access to online resources and training from the Walkthrus Project. She added that headteachers had been to early briefing meetings which included asking them how they were going to train all their staff, including their teaching assistants.

### School Attendance Overview and Elective Home Education Data and Trends

Alasdair Whitelaw, Pupil Inclusion and Support Manager (AfC), gave an overview of children's attendance in the Borough's schools and the strategic opportunities taken to ensure all children were accessing education.

Alasdair Whitelaw informed that there was new government guidance set to be published, originally in September 2023 but was pushed back due to the parliamentary process being slower than expected. In spite of this, the Borough through AfC (Achieving for Children) were using the guidance. This had meant that the Borough had to change from a fully traded offer, where schools buy back the Borough's services from Education Welfare Officers (EWO), to being centrally funded to continue using the education welfare officers to fulfil statutory duties. The central funding had been secured.

The core offer to all 88 schools (encompassing academies, maintained, special and independent schools) would include:

- Point of contact where EWO would be assigned with each school.

- Attendance Lead on Senior Leadership Team (SLT).
- Attendance Support Meeting once every full school term by each EWO.
- Signposting for children to other services.
- Legal Process, such as fixed penalty notices, parental contracts, education supervision orders, parenting orders and attendance prosecutions.
- Working with other services.
- Tailoring to the needs of school and cohort as some schools would recruit their own family support workers while others would use pastoral leads.

Alasdair Whitelaw informed that the Borough was in the process of extending the service. This involved reaching out and seeking expressions of interest for a new buyback service. With some schools expressing interest, Alasdair Whitelaw stated that a new service level agreement would need to be formulated, and that he received notifications of interest in the service offer. From there, he would recruit an additional EWO to support schools with persistent absence and severe absence. He added that schools were facing difficulties with recruitment and retention of staff to conduct home visits on why some pupils were not attending schools.

Alasdair Whitelaw also informed that there was capacity to further support schools further by recruiting an additional EWO as well as extend the work hours of currently employed part-time EWOs. There would be a specialist EWO for children with a social worker that would be able to track data across the schools, provide additional support to the social worker, and challenge schools and parents not performing their duty.

Alasdair Whitelaw also stated that the Borough was working closely working with Virtual School which had extended duties in tracking any child who had a social worker.

On Elective Home Education, Alasdair Whitelaw explained that the Borough had a dedicated Elective Home Education Coordinator. He informed that parents were not required to be on an elective home education register when home educating their children, nor did they need to comply with a home visit or speak to an elective home education coordinator if they don't want to. The Elective Home Education Coordinator, Alasdair Whitelaw stated, had built good relationships with parents whereby they would inform parents of the process, provide support, and scrutinise the education at each house.

Alasdair Whitelaw informed that home education did not need to follow the national curriculum, include any particular subjects, follow a school day or have holidays observed by schools. Nevertheless, home education must be adequate and the Local Authority had duty to investigate whether home education was adequate and challenge when needed.

Alasdair Whitelaw explained that home education was on the rise for a number of reasons. As of April 2023, 206 children were recorded as being home educated, an increase by 13 since January 2023. In response to this, the Borough was seeking to improve communication around home education, such as building relations with headteachers and work across the services in the Borough. This was caused by an initial lack of recorded data, the Covid pandemic, children's mental health, work in a smaller environment, difficulty in accessing the school, and dissatisfaction with the school (e.g., bullying, school in general or SEND).

Councillor Knowles asked if the Borough had any provisions to support teachers with home educated student exam attendance. Alasdair Whitelaw replied that through funding SEMH (social, emotional and mental health), home educated children had their examinations within a school environment. He added that there was also encouragement to get children back into school, where appropriate.

The Chair asked if the Borough included religious grounds and dissatisfaction with the school itself as reasons for elective home education. Alasdair Whitelaw responded that there were always individual reasons with each family, such as parents being home educated themselves

and continuing this practice upon their children or no vacancies at faith schools. Essentially, some reasons could be based on mindset rather than a reactive reason.

The Chair then asked whether there were trends against the school testing system. Alasdair Whitelaw responded that he believed that the education system did not fit all children where all needs could be met in the mainstream. Therefore, the Borough had been working to support schools to manage this.

### SEND Overview of Data and Preparation for Inspection

David Griffiths, Special Educational Needs Service (SEND) Manager (AfC), started off explaining that Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP) were care plans for children and young people with significant and complex special educational needs. There were 1,179 EHCPs for children and young people aged 0-25 in 2023 so far in the Borough, a 10% increase compared to 2022. This followed a national trend of a 10% increase every year which would concerningly place additional pressure on the system.

The primary needs were the following:

- 41% for autism,
- 18% for social, emotional and mental health (SEMH),
- 16% for communication and language,
- 13% learning,
- 8% for physical and medical.

In terms of school attendance:

- 49% of children and young people with EHCPs were attending mainstream schools (i.e., maintained or academy),
- 32% attended a special school,
- 10% in further education (e.g., Sixth Form, colleges or specialist colleges),
- 9% attended other forms of education (e.g., elective home education, home learning package etc.).
- 16% of the Borough's children and young people with EHCPs were placed outside of the Borough.

The first stage of a EHCP a 20-week-long assessment process; in which around 90% of EHC assessments were completed on time, compared to the national average of 50-60%. This was positive as it meant young people were properly receiving support as well as the Borough meeting its statutory duty.

David Griffiths then explained how the Borough prepared for SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) inspections, particularly as the timings were unknown and thus the Borough had to be always ready.

- A SEN (special education needs) data dashboard was established to share data and figures internally and external partners, which also included regular review meetings.
- A Self-Evaluation Framework (SEF) was being completed to test officers on questions from inspectors as well as compile supporting evidence.
- A draft Quality Assurance Framework being reviewed to ensure the work was at high quality.
- '50 Documents' being drawn together in preparation for the inspectors' arrival.

David Griffiths informed that the Borough had a SEND inspection six years ago (around 2017) which did not go well, resulting in the Borough being placed on an action plan. From there, the DfE (Department for Education) had been reviewing the progress of the action plan every six months or year. By March 2023, the DfE gave a positive response that the Borough had "demonstrated clear and sustained progress. This [meant] that [DfE] no longer [needed] to continue with formal monitoring." However, this also meant that the Borough had to move into the SEND inspection framework.

The Chair asked what role parents had in the SEND inspections. David Griffiths answered that parents had a crucial role as they would provide input on the child's live experience. The Borough had sought to engage with parents through parent engagement events and communication sub-groups. In addition, a partnership group called SEND Voices was established to further acquire parental input.

Alasdair Whitelaw added that it was important to get the voice of the child through the parents. One method of engagement was using photographs of the child who was being discussed about in a meeting rather than only presenting statistics.

Kelly Nash, Education Support and SEND Strategy Manager (AfC), added that an Inclusion Summit took place in February 2023 with the feedback from parents and carers was that they felt they could not participate and engage. Based on this, there were plans to have more parent-care engagement sessions in Autumn 2023 while having the Inclusion Summit in Spring 2024.

Councillor Wilson asked for an outline of the issues in which Ofsted had highlighted which needed to be improved upon out of formal monitoring. He also asked what AfC's priorities were going forward. David Griffiths replied that one issue was the consistency in quality and practice with EHCPs, to which AfC sought to improve upon. While most of the improvements were made a long time ago, a lingering challenge was therapies from the NHS due to waiting lists. David Griffiths stated that AfC had been working closely with the ICB (integrated care board) and Berkshire Healthcare to address this as well as look into innovative methods; however, it would likely be a continuous challenge going forward.

Kelly Nash added that one of AfC's priorities was a five-year SEND strategy from 2022-27, which included six priorities and was co-produced and consulted with all key stakeholders (including parent carers). She offered to return and present the six priorities in further detail.

Councillor Wilson suggested that the six priorities in the SEND strategy could be elaborated further in future catch-up meeting or in another meeting. The Chair agreed.

**ACTION: Kelly Nash to present the six priorities in the SEND strategy in a future meeting.**

The Chair asked about the number of EHCPs with the primary need being autism, namely whether they reflected national or local trends, more diagnosis or more parents applying for EHCPs. David Griffiths responded that autism being a primary need in the Borough were reflective of national trends and occurred in other local authorities. The reasons did include increased diagnosis as well as more accurate diagnosis to respond to needs. He added that EHCPs unlocked support resources, but schools were facing pressures to meet SEN student needs.

Councillor Wilson then asked whether there was a flexible adapt-and-respond approach to the strengths and weaknesses of individual children with SENs, particularly as some autistic children may be skilled in some areas but not in other areas. Kelly Nash replied that AfC had been working in response to this by supporting schools in conducting a needs-led approach to supporting students so that children did not require a diagnosis to receive support. In addition, AfC would support schools in conducting a strengths-based approach to focus on what a child could do rather than what they could not do. This approach was to benefit all pupils in a whole class approach.

David Griffiths added that support to SEN children was based on their presenting needs rather than diagnoses.

Delivering Better Values update

Kelly Nash introduced the item by informing that RBWM had a deficit (alongside 55 other local authorities). As such, it was part of Delivering Better Values (DBV), a programme to improve understanding on improving support for children and young people in the Borough, notably around decision making and finances. She added that the other 55 local authorities (LA) which were part of the programme feeding back to the DfE on what could be potential common challenges across all LAs. Kelly Nash hoped this could lead to changes to policy from central government rather than LAs making their own independent decisions.

There were three parts to the project:

- Module 1: Baselines and Forecasts
- Module 2: Root Cause Diagnostics
- Module 3: Implementation Planning

Based on a survey to parents and carers, the underlying themes from the results were clarification of goals and understanding of needs in EHCPs and the utilisation of existing services. She also showed a pie chart showing the results of a survey to parents on whether their children's needs were leading to the ideal outcome as well some individual parent comments.

Kelly Nash then discussed the Opportunity Matrix which highlighted key areas which would mitigate the deficit in the services. These included:

- Supporting the goals and aspirations of the child can be achieved without the need of an EHCP,
- Supporting the goals and aspirations of the child through RP/SEN Unit rather than INMSS (independent mainstream specialist schools),
- Supporting the goals and aspirations of the child through a mainstream setting rather than INMSS,
- Supporting the goals and aspirations of the child through a mainstream setting rather than post-16,
- Supporting the goals and aspirations of the child through a mainstream setting rather than MSS,
- Supporting the goals and aspirations of the child can be achieving by ceasing EHCP earlier (post 16).

Based the Opportunity Matrix, Kelly Nash explained that AfC had narrowed down three themes: inclusive mainstream, post-16, and the right place and the right time. From this, AfC had produced a draft Inclusion Improvement Programme with its key elements:

- Allocate money to an inclusion strategy and resources to support this,
- Expand the dashboard to prioritise focus and give visibility of progress,
- Appoint an Associate Director to oversee change in programme and inclusion work,
- A project manager to head up inclusion audits,
- Involvement from seconded heads and SENCOs (Special Educational Needs Coordinator),
- Implementation of a team of a range of specialities.

Kelly Nash mentioned that DBV had given positive feedback of this and was hopeful that the Borough would receive a bid of £1 million.

Councillor Wilson asked what was meant by numbers under 'Steady state' in the context of the Opportunity Mix. Kelly Nash replied that they were total reductions as a result of certain changes which could lead to savings. David Griffiths suggested that the accountants could give a more in-depth explanation of the 'Steady state'. Councillor Wilson suggested that this could be offline.

**ACTION: David Griffiths and Kelly Nash to arrange an in-depth explanation of 'Steady state'.**

Councillor Wilson then asked about the meaning of the pie chart on one of the presentation slides. Kelly Nash replied that they reflected surveys and case studies of children who had an EHCP. It was to analyse whether children did not require a EHCP when they reached 16 years of age. Alasdair Whitelaw added that it also explored whether children would have gone through the education system without an EHCP if AfC's resources and strategy were implemented.

The Chair asked what AfC hoped future policy from central government would be. Kelly Nash answered that funding had been a challenge for the schools because many schools were stretched in providing the finances to support SEN children. Therefore, AfC and LAs were hoping for more funding. In addition, LAs hoped for more guidance and clarity on which children should be SEN-K (i.e., which children should be getting provisions without a plan in contrast to those which required an EHCP).

Dates of future meetings

The Forum noted that the next meeting was 19<sup>th</sup> October 2023 at 5:00pm and would be held virtually via Zoom.

The meeting, which began at 5.02 pm, finished at 6.30 pm

Chair.....

Date.....