

Cabinet

16 February 2023

Educational Attainment Working Group Report

Recommendations

That Cabinet:

1. Notes and comments on the progress made by the Educational Attainment Member Working Group.
2. Considers for approval the recommendations made by the Member Working Group, as set out in Section 3 of the report, and supports the development of those recommendations into a costed action plan.
3. Subject to recommendation (2) above, approves the continuation of the Member Working Group to enable it to gather further evidence and to develop the costed action plan for consideration by Cabinet.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 In July 2022, Full Council approved a motion to establish a cross party Member Working Group to examine the inequalities in educational attainment across Warwickshire. This was in response to the approval by Full Council to the State of Warwickshire report, and by Cabinet to the countywide approach to Levelling Up. In particular, the State of Warwickshire report had highlighted inequality in attainment in education. The Member Working Group was therefore established to explore the reasons behind this, and to propose how the Council could reduce inequalities and effect positive change.
- 1.2 Nine members were chosen to be on the Member Working Group, representing each of the five borough and district areas and each political group. The members were Councillors Brett Beetham, Margaret Bell, Barbara Brown, Jonathan Chilvers, Yousef Dahmash, Pete Gilbert, Jan Matecki, Jerry Roodhouse and Ian Shenton. Councillor Beetham, who had proposed the motion at Full Council to establish the Member Working Group, was elected as Chairman.
- 1.3 Due to the period of national mourning following the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and the need to postpone and subsequently rearrange meetings, the timescale for the Member Working Group had to be compressed. Nevertheless, members were able to discuss the issues relating

to educational attainment in detail and were able to propose a number of recommendations.

- 1.4 Although good progress was made, members agreed that further discussions would be required to fully develop an action plan that would allow positive changes towards narrowing attainment gaps to be enacted. They have therefore recommended to Cabinet that the Group continues to meet to allow this to occur.

2. Supporting Information

- 2.1 Members considered a wide range of data relating to attainment of children across Warwickshire. This was broken down into the different Key Stages; by geography; and also by attainment of disadvantaged children compared to those who were not disadvantaged. In this context, disadvantaged refers to children who are in receipt of free school meals or pupil premium.
- 2.2 The Group's remit was to investigate the major contributing factors to the discrepancy in educational attainment across Warwickshire, and to look at what could be done to influence and act on those factors in terms of creating a longer-term action plan. This would be done on a holistic basis, looking at the whole county rather than focusing on specific areas where attainment rates were lowest. The Group wanted to investigate the major contributing factors to the discrepancy of educational attainment, and which of these factors the Council could directly, and potentially indirectly, control and influence.
- 2.3 It was accepted that gaps in educational attainment across Warwickshire had been an ongoing issue in the county for a number of years and attempts at combatting this had been made previously. The Group considered a significant amount of statistical data that showed attainment rates over a ten-year period, which included the most recent available data. It was noted that the difference in attainment between districts widened as children progressed through school; at the Early Years Foundation Stage the difference between the lowest and highest attaining districts was six percentage points, at Year 1 it was eight percentage points, and this increased further to 12 percentage points by Year 2.
- 2.4 Members noted that the highest performing districts were Warwick and Stratford, with North Warwickshire and Nuneaton and Bedworth having the lowest level of attainment. However, in terms of achievement by disadvantaged pupils, a higher proportion were meeting the expected standards in reading, writing and maths in Nuneaton and Bedworth compared to those in the Stratford and Warwick districts. For secondary schools, attainment rates for disadvantaged pupils were below the national average. However, attainment rates were similar to those for statistical neighbours; that is, local authorities that shared similar characteristics to Warwickshire in respect of population and demographics.

- 2.5 Work on improving educational attainment is taking place through other forums, such as the Closing the Gap Board and the Education Challenge Board. The Education Challenge Board contributes to Warwickshire's Education Strategy by maintaining an overview of Warwickshire school performance, strengths, opportunities and challenges. The Board acts as a core stakeholder in education to support, advise and challenge the Local Authority on aspects related to existing and new education strategy and policy. The Closing the Gap Board is the key strategic driver to reduce the attainment gap between Warwickshire's disadvantaged pupils and national non-disadvantaged pupils. It provides a strategic oversight of the work across the County Council. Its primary objective is to ensure that support for disadvantaged pupils remains a key priority. Examples of good practice were being shared through discussions at Board meetings. It was considered to be apparent that strategies that could improve attainment were in place, but there needed to be a more clearly defined structure to pull everything together into a workable solution for the whole county. Additionally, members had sought for greater clarity on what areas the Council had direct influence over.
- 2.6 The education attainment gap measures the difference in attainment of Warwickshire's disadvantaged pupils compared to the attainment national non-disadvantaged pupils. The 2022 gaps are shown in the table below. A smaller figure denotes a smaller attainment shortfall and is considered 'better'.

	Achievement of a Good Level of Development at the end of Reception	Key Stage 1 expected standard in reading	Key Stage 1 expected standard in writing	Key Stage 1 expected standard in maths	Key Stage 2 expected standard in combined reading, writing and maths	Key stage 4, achievement of a grade 5 or higher in GCSE English and maths
Warwickshire	-24	-23	-26	-20	-25	-34
National	-20	-21	-22	-21	-22	-27

- 2.7 Headteachers wanted their children to succeed but highlighted the difficulties in delivering what they wanted for pupils because of financial capacity and staffing. Schools that were involved in the forums welcomed the proposals being suggested at the different forums and were looking for serious action to be put in place as a result, rather than continue to examine and talk through the issues.
- 2.8 Members identified quality of leadership from a school's headteacher and governing body, and the ambition shown by that leadership team, as being an important factor that enhanced children's learning. It was noted neighbouring schools sharing similar demographics could have varying levels of attainment, and that the leadership and focus within the school could play a part in this.
- 2.9 Socioeconomic factors and personal circumstances were accepted as being contributing factors as to why certain children did not attain as well as their peers. However, members felt that this should not be given as an excuse for a lack of attainment. Members identified non-teaching pastoral care as being an

important factor in helping to improve a child's attainment. It was suggested that such care could be given more effectively with the potential involvement of partner agencies such as early help, health services and other support services.

- 2.10 Positive mental health was also identified as an important factor in aiding attainment. Members were informed that mental health practitioners were working in some schools through the NHSE funded Mental Health in Schools programme, and this service had helped improve wellbeing and attainment in school for those children accessing the support. It was felt that early diagnosis and resolution of child mental health problems correlated with improved educational attainment and could help to subsequently reduce demand for services in adulthood. Members therefore agreed to recommend having discussions with the Integrated Care Board to ensure there was a multi-agency approach to positively support children's mental health and non-teaching pastoral care.
- 2.11 It was noted that provision of free school meals was relevant to the statistical indicators of attainment and achievement, as a child in receipt of free school meals would be regarded as disadvantaged. Members were of the opinion that the Council should explore proposals that aim to significantly increase the take-up of free school meals, including considering how an automatic enrolment system might legally be brought forward, to maximise the take up of free school meals amongst those children eligible for them and thus enabling schools to access greater levels of pupil premium funding support if these children were identified and automatically opted in to receiving free school meals.
- 2.12 Members were keen to highlight there was a difference between a child's attainment and their achievement. There may be children who may not perform well academically who would make great efforts with their schoolwork, and extracurricular activities, and make what was for them a great achievement, but statistically speaking they would not attain as well as their peers. Members were keen to explore the feasibility of having a countywide awards ceremony, similar to the Star Awards, for children to celebrate their achievements, in order to motivate and engage them with their schoolwork. Similar awards were already presented to children who attended the Virtual School. This would be dependent on the budget being available for such an award ceremony being inaugurated however, and the work to explore this item would need to look to identify a suitable source of funding for it to be viable.

3. Next Steps

- 3.1 Members wanted to undertake focused visits to particular schools, for example to one that might have previously been failing but had now demonstrated a vast improvement in its attainment rates. It was hoped that these visits would allow members to learn about the strategies that had been implemented and how these had led to an improvement in attainment, to see

if there were any lessons learnt that could be applicable to other schools. At the same time members hope to learn about well-intentioned strategies that had been implemented that had not been successful. The visits could also include speaking to pupils, to get their perspective on what was and wasn't working well. It has been proposed that this work is completed by the end of May 2023.

- 3.2 Members felt visits should be prioritised to enhance the evidence gathering they had already been undertaking, in order to better inform them before they went on to consider what ought to be included in their action plan and what future recommendations could be made. Members agreed that they wanted to propose indicators of progress and attainment, and how they should be measured, as a recommendation. However, these should be formulated after the school visits had taken place and members' findings discussed in greater detail.
- 3.3 The full list of recommendations to be proposed by members of the Member Working Group is as follows:
- For the Member Working Group to continue its work beyond February to allow more time to examine how discrepancies in attainment can be addressed, and to fully develop an action plan to be implemented. The action plan would include proposed indicators of progress and attainment, and how they should be measured or demonstrated, and an indication of funding streams and deliverability.
 - For members to visit schools to hear from settings of good practice and those identified as showing a gap in attainment levels to gauge likely impact of recommendations, before going on to reach conclusions and discuss the development of an action plan.
 - To draw together key data sets, objectives and outcomes from relevant groups and forums that already exist across the county to better understand where gaps remain and a focus is required. Once gaps are better understood, potential solutions could include:
 - Showcasing the work of existing schools known for their good best practice to support others; this could include examples of well-intentioned strategies that have been less successful.
 - Ensuring appropriate targets are being set for all children.
 - Exploring the feasibility of launching a Star Awards-style event for children for whom attainment in line with expected outcomes is lower than their peers to engage and motivate them to attain well, subject to suitable funding being available.
 - Establishing links to multi-agency working groups established through the Integrated Care Board in relation to children's mental health to ensure a focus on improving attainment and reducing demand based on early diagnosis and access to services.
 - Support further consideration of proposals aimed at increasing the take up of free school meals, including any options available for automatic enrolment of

those children eligible so as to maximise the benefits of pupil premium funding.

4. Financial Implications

There is a potential financial implication, in that the action plan would need to be costed and funding would need to be secured for the award ceremony that has been proposed.

5. Environmental Implications

None.

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The report was circulated to the following members prior to publication:

Local Member(s): None

Other members: Beetham, Bell, Brown, Chilvers, Dahmash, Gilbert, Matecki, Roodhouse and Shenton