

SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL**CABINET****DATE: 26 MAY 2020****SUBJECT: SCRUTINY OF THE PUPIL REFERRAL UNIT (PRU) CAPITAL STRATEGY**

Note: this paper should be read in conjunction with the Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) Capital Strategy (Item 9, Cabinet, 26 May 2020).

INTRODUCTION:

1. On 19 May 2020, we met with officers from the Children, Families, Lifelong Learning and Culture Directorate (the Directorate) to scrutinise a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) Capital Strategy which is to be subject to a Cabinet decision on 26 May 2020. Owing to the coronavirus pandemic, scrutiny was conducted remotely via a video call. We heard evidence from:
 - Liz Mills, Director – Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture;
 - Jo Twine, Property Lead & Independent Living; and
 - Dee Turvill, Alternative Provision and Participation Manager.
2. As outlined in the PRU Capital Strategy (the Strategy), the PRU accommodation within Surrey is dilapidated, does not comply with Department for Education minimum space standards¹, and lacks capacity to provide adequate places in appropriate locations; it lacks facilities and space to provide a suitable learning environment in which a broad and balanced curriculum may be delivered. Therefore, it does not support Surrey County Council's ambition to adequately meet the needs of some of our most vulnerable children and young people; and it does not allow the Council to effectively meet its statutory duty to ensure all children of statutory school age receive suitable education.²
3. The Strategy is one of number of capital strategies being developed by the Directorate with the aim of promoting independence, supporting vulnerable children and remediating the backlog of issues associated with the existing education estate. It seeks to improve the condition and review the capacity, suitability and locations of existing sites. It provides a policy framework to enable joint working between the Directorate and property colleagues to undertake more technical evaluation which can deliver practical solutions within realistic timescales.
4. Exclusion from a mainstream education setting into alternative provision (AP) can have a significant impact on young people and set their lives on certain, often undesirable, pathways. The Strategy is focused on creating localised solutions and providing outreach services into mainstream settings. Young people who attend PRUs are to do so on a programmed basis which will facilitate re-integration into

¹ The Schools Premises (England) Regulations 2012; and Building Bulletin 104 Ref: DFE-00306-2015

² Subsection 19(1) Education Act 1996

normal school life where possible. The proposals form part of a wider reform of AP services.

5. The proposals seek to secure the funding needed to test site options and to develop a business case that will renew the PRU estate, in a phased programme, over the next ten years – beginning with the urgent relocation of the Pewley Hill PRU in the short term, to mitigate the poor condition of the facility. The Strategy recommends that:
 1. *Cabinet agrees the approach set out in [the] report to provide appropriate PRU provision that adheres to the statutory requirements and accommodation guidelines for alternative provision to support our ambition for children and young people.*
 2. *Approval of £1m to support the relocation of the Pewley Hill PRU as set out in [the] report.*
 3. *Approval of £1m to carry out a feasibility study for long term accommodation requirements and inform a business case to be considered at Cabinet in the Autumn 2020.*

KEY AREAS OF DISCUSSION:

6. Existing PRU provision is made up of eight providers (across Primary and Secondary phase and including hospital-based provision) delivered across 14 different sites. The geographic distribution of which is unplanned, having developed over time.
7. We heard that not one of the current PRU sites had been deemed fit-for-purpose by external assessors. The PRUs in which AP is delivered are not conducive to delivering the nurturing support which attendees require; the ‘uninspiring’ sites can cause further challenging behaviours. Furthermore, a lack of outdoor spaces means that attendees often cannot access an adequate range of provision. For example, one PRU in Woking consists of two portable buildings on a small plot of concreted land enclosed by wire fencing. Many settings are in old buildings which have been unsuitably repurposed.
8. Officers commented that the rationalisation of sites would not necessarily be advantageous and that they are working closely with head teachers to identify suitable locations for future provision.
9. The Chairman asked how the PRUs had, despite their physical condition, received Good and Outstanding Ofsted ratings. An officer explained that this is because the Ofsted framework does not penalise settings for the condition of their physical condition, provided there is evidence of strong and effective leadership and management; a lack of capital investment is not factored into an inspection if head teachers are working effectively.
10. Liz Mills commented that there is a high demand for places, which are often over-allocated, meaning that not all pupils can attend simultaneously and limiting the ability of staff to provide outreach support. Despite this, the Directorate considers that the present number of PRU places will be sufficient to meet demand once effective outreach services are operational. An aim of the Strategy is to transform PRUs into places where children can both receive additional support whilst continuing to attend mainstream settings and from which outreach support can be

delivered into mainstream settings. The assumption is made that further outreach support will help to alleviate demand on PRU settings by enabling greater numbers of pupils to remain in mainstream education. The Strategy is to be situated within a wider, more holistic approach which will be underpinned by the development of a new AP strategy.

11. A Member raised concerns that the co-location of Primary and Secondary phase provision may lead to younger pupils being inappropriately influenced by their older schoolmates. An officer responded that, whilst there were not yet any agreed plans to co-locate, any such risk would be mitigated by designing spaces in a manner which enables each year group to function in a suitable environment.
12. A Member questioned whether the Strategy included provisions for the commissioning of PRUs within the academy system, as this may alleviate some of the pressures on both state and academy governing bodies which are mindful of the pressures exerted on PRU capacity and make compromises accordingly. Liz Mills responded that three of the current PRUs are academies and had recently formed a multi-academy trust, and that the transformation of PRUs was being developed using a sector-led approach involving all providers of alternative provision in Surrey and the phase leads for education. The Directorate is adopting a commissioning approach which builds upon the expertise in the AP sector. Furthermore, the Council annually delegates a sum of money each year (circa £1.2 million) for secondary colleagues to create localised learning solutions, which has been successful in preventing exclusions by providing extra AP support and capacity.
13. A Member highlighted the importance of blended packages of support, whilst also cautioning that locations must be appropriate to each pupil, due to the impact that can have on a child's self-esteem. Liz Mills agreed with the Member and explained that there are number of outdoor of learning facilities which allow pupils to engage in new activities which promote their development.
14. Officers were asked how Surrey benchmarks against comparator authorities in terms of investment in PRUs and AP spend. Surrey was said to benchmark well in terms of revenue expenditure and investment into the running of PRUs, but added that the AP estate has not been prioritised, with emphasis being placed on basic need, pupil numbers and the expansion of the mainstream estate. With regard to AP spend, which comes from the high needs block, officers commented that Surrey benchmarks highly and that any efficiencies likely to be seen will be in the external provider market for alternative provision, rather than in the PRUs, whilst more effective use of outreach support and better learning environments will create better value for money.
15. An officer commented that a considerable sum of money was being spent on spot purchasing AP and this was being reviewed by the commissioning team as part of the Strategy. Spot purchasing is often used to cater for SEN needs whilst trying to source the right full-time placement for children. Emphasis was placed on taking a child-centred approach to placements.
16. Concerns were raised about the cost of £1 million for the feasibility study. This is to be conducted over four years, involve detailed analysis of the existing sites, scope a range of a projects using multi-disciplinary design, cost consulting, and environmental assessments.

CONCLUSIONS:

17. We welcome this long-overdue investment in Surrey's inadequate PRU estate and thank the officers who took the time to meet with us to discuss these proposals. We welcome the wider reform of how AP is delivered and support the Directorate's ambitions to use AP and PRUs to support pupils to remain in mainstream education where possible.

Contact Officer: Benjamin Awkal, Scrutiny Officer, benjamin.awkal@surreycc.gov.uk
