

MINUTES of the meeting of General scrutiny committee held at Committee Room 1, The Shire Hall, St Peter's Square, Hereford, HR1 2HX on Tuesday 9 May 2017 at 10.00 am

Present: Councillor WLS Bowen (Chairman)
Councillor CA Gandy (Vice Chairman)

Councillors: JM Bartlett, MJK Cooper, Mrs A Fisher, J Hardwick, EPJ Harvey, MT McEvilly, AJW Powers, Mr P Sell, EJ Swinglehurst, A Warmington and SD Williams

In attendance: Councillor JG Lester (Cabinet Member)

Officers: C Baird (interim director children's wellbeing), L Fraser (head of learning and achievement), J Coleman (Democratic Services Manager/Statutory Scrutiny Officer).

70. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies for absence were received.

71. NAMED SUBSTITUTES

No substitutions were made.

72. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

73. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 17 January 2017 be approved as a correct record.

74. SUGGESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC

None.

75. QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC

None.

76. SCHOOL EXAMINATION PERFORMANCE

The committee was invited to consider school performance for summer 2016 and the effectiveness of the Herefordshire school improvement partnership strategy and framework in improving outcomes for Herefordshire's children and young people.

The head of learning and achievement gave a presentation, a copy of which had been published as a supplement to the agenda papers. This included additional information on comparative information on performance for 2013 and 2016.

In response to questions the interim director of children's wellbeing (dcw) and the head of learning and achievement (hla) commented as follows. (references in brackets are to the published agenda papers where applicable).

In relation to the difference in attainment between pupils receiving free school meals at key stage 1 and key stage 2 and pupils at secondary schools the hla commented that one issue might be that primary school pupils were dispersed amongst a number of schools whereas a concentration of pupils in secondary school may make it easier for a school to plan work for a cohort. It was also possible that some schools were making better use of the pupil premium than others and this was something that might need further exploration.

(p 17 para 5 bp 3) The percentage of five year old children eligible for free school meals reaching a good level of development at the end of the early years foundation stage was 51%. This remained below regional and national averages. The hla commented that, although a slight improvement on the previous year, the attainment level was low. It was a high priority to address this issue. The early years team was working to increase the take up of two year olds in nursery education funded places and publicise the local offer of the availability of 30 hours of free nursery education. This could be key to reducing the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers which is evident in Herefordshire data from the reception class. As part of this approach the early years team was working with nurseries and child minders briefing on the need to improve provision for the disadvantaged. The aim was to ensure children were as well prepared for school as they could be.

The dcw added that the gap in attainment for pupils eligible for free school meals had not been something upon which schools and academies within the authority had focused upon until a few years ago. This had now changed and whilst measures took time to take effect early years settings and schools were now much more aware of the focus upon this aspect. In addition to Children's Centres the authority was providing outreach services on a multi-agency basis. However, there were challenges to be overcome. A number of schools were also developing closer ties with nurseries and even taking on the running of them.

Paragraphs 6 and 18 of the report referred to a presentation the headteacher from Vauxhall primary school in London had given to the Herefordshire Leadership Conference in November 2016. The conference had focussed on 'diminishing the difference' between the attainment of disadvantaged children and young people and their peers. The presentation had explained his approach to raising standards for children eligible for free school meals. The cabinet member (children and young people's wellbeing) elaborated that the headteacher's starting point had been that whatever a pupil's home circumstances it was what happened in the educational institution that mattered and domestic circumstances should not be used as an excuse to justify different attainment levels. Those attending the conference had found this an inspirational message.

The work of the school improvement board was praised and the hope expressed that the process led by the board would continue despite the pressure on staffing resources.

The hla clarified the process for target setting for schools. She confirmed that the authority had set targets for individual schools, with the aim of Herefordshire ranking in the top quartile of local authority area performance in education, health and care measures. Briefings with Chairs of governing bodies had been held to explain the target setting process from which good feedback had been received.

The report referred to the authority's commitment to a self-sustaining model of school improvement for raising standards across the county where best practice was shared

across the system and schools who required support benefitted from the expertise of leading headteachers and national leaders of education. It was asked whether this resource was sufficient. The hla commented that the approach of using lead practitioners to support improvement in schools had improved results in schools. The authority encouraged schools to work together and learn from current practitioners. She referenced Ofsted's report on St Martin's Primary School, Hereford which referred to the positive impact of the partnership with the local teaching school. In addition to those who had attained teaching school and national leader in education status the authority used a number of headteachers and heads of department and subject teachers to disseminate good practice. The authority also encouraged headteachers to apply to become national leaders of education.

With reference to some schools employing consultants as improvement advisors, the dcw commented that it was important to obtain different perspectives. Whilst a consultant could develop in-depth knowledge of a school, over time a working relationship could develop that provided one longstanding perspective. The authority recommended that such support was changed every 3 years to provide fresh perspectives and aid independence.

(P19 (paragraph 10)) Reference was made to the council's work in partnership with the Regional Schools Commissioner. The hla confirmed that there was a good understanding of strengths and weaknesses across the region and close working to make use of best practice. As examples she gave the expertise drawn from Solihull MBC on phonics and the work with Warwickshire CC (WCC) on attainment of pupils eligible for free school meals, noting that the attainment pattern between primary and secondary schools was different in that county.

In relation to the respective performance at key stage 5 of the sixth form college and school based 6th forms the hla commented that the two provided a different experience for pupils. Several 6th forms met the needs of a specific cohort of pupils.

The hla confirmed that the budget for school improvement remained unchanged for 2017/18. The dcw added that a national consultation had been undertaken on a reduction in the Education Support Grant. This had implied a £1m reduction for Herefordshire. The council and Schools Forum had worked on a proposal to address this funding reduction. The government had then announced that it would review funding allocated for school improvement because the decision not to proceed with the requirement that all schools become academies meant that local authorities remained obliged to support maintained schools.

In response to a question as to whether competition between schools would be a disincentive to schools supporting other schools by sharing best practice the hla commented that a bidding process had been devised as an incentive under which schools could bid for money for staff released. To access the funding, targets had to be set and the school improvement partnership monitored progress against those targets. It was added that schools were not in direct competition and people pursuing a career in education had a commitment to improving learning.

It was asked what chance rural smaller schools had of moving from the ofsted requiring improvement category to good. The hla commented that there had been success in moving primary schools assessed as requiring improvement into the good category. In terms of secondary schools many were academies but the local authority did work with all schools. The authority did work with academies to support improvement and also worked with the Regional Schools Commissioner.

It was acknowledged that the report, whilst correct at the time of drafting in February in stating 80% of pupils in the secondary phase were in good or outstanding schools, did

not reflect the Ofsted judgement regarding Bishop of Bluecoat School Hereford as requiring improvement overall. This meant 65% of pupils in the secondary phase were now in good or outstanding schools. It was requested that this be made clear in any updated report for publication.

(p19 para 9) The dcw provided clarification on the position regarding the formation of multi-academy trusts and a feasibility study into the benefits of establishing Children's Trust arrangements. In response to the Secretary of State for Education's statement that she expected all maintained schools would become academies schools had been asked what this might mean and what role the local authority might play. The Government had subsequently indicated that whilst it expected all schools to take advantage of academy status by 2020 it would not require all schools to do so. The authority's focus was on securing high attainment and providing high quality school places through the capital investment strategy. However, mindful of government thinking on the future direct provision of children's services the local authority was exploring what arrangements might be appropriate in Herefordshire in advance of any future national directive. This included understanding what a children's trust arrangement might offer. The cabinet member emphasised the authority's focus on ensuring schools were sustainable and attaining good results. He did not want organisational considerations to detract from attainment.

(p19 para 22) Regarding the reference to the opportunity to bid for a share of a national £140m strategic school improvement fund, the hla reported that sub-regional groups had been established by the Regional Schools Commissioner through which bids would be channelled. However, the RSC had not yet determined the criteria for bids. It was noted that the sub-regional board had been established and this was ahead of the situation in other areas.

(p16) In relation to the implications for the curriculum of the new range of performance indicators introduced by national government, which included attainment 8, the hla commented that the list of subjects that qualified was quite extensive.

It was noted that parents had no obligation to inform the authority if they were schooling their children at home.

The dcw clarified that historically there were comparatively low rates of permanent and fixed term exclusions in the county. The overall published results included children who had been excluded.

It was suggested that the school improvement partnership's aim for all education to be "highly valued" was a rather subjective measure. The hla explained that surveys were undertaken to measure this aspect.

(para 11) Assurance was sought that the support being provided for governing bodies was sufficient. The dcw commented that some years ago the number of schools buying a governor support service from the authority had declined making that traded service unviable. The local authority had made clear what role it could offer. Training of governors was now delegated to schools who could buy in a service from providers. Herefordshire Governors Association was an independent organisation that in the past had offered routes to obtain training. The local authority provided termly briefings for governors and had some specific involvement with individual governing bodies.

It was stated that some schools were subsidising their 6th form provision from funding allocated for other year groups. This raised questions of viability and it was asked what contact the local authority had had with relevant governing bodies about sixth form provision. The dcw commented that the local authority had a responsibility to ensure that sufficient places were available of appropriate quality. The authority was willing to

discuss provision with any school. At national level the assessment would be that there were sufficient places in Herefordshire. In respect of maintained schools the authority required 3 yr budget plans to be produced and the authority would be able to identify any trends in expenditure that were of concern. Academies reported to the Education Funding Agency and he could not comment on to what depth the Agency assessed budgets.

It was suggested that there may well be an increase in pupils in the county with English as an additional language (EAL) and potentially a larger number of pupils eligible for free school meals and the pupil premium. It would be helpful to assess the attainment of cohorts of pupils to be assessed as they moved through the system. The dcw commented that this could be considered.

The dcw agreed to circulate a briefing note on the current school funding picture and the introduction of the national funding formula.

The hla confirmed that data was held on attainment of traveller children. However, the numbers were so small that the information could not be made public because individuals could be identified. Attainment levels were monitored but because the numbers were small it was hard to identify trends. In summary, performance across the key stages was mixed. Attendance was good compared with other authorities.

It was observed that whilst a wealth of detail had been provided to the committee it was not clear what it meant and what might be done in response to it. The dcw acknowledged that the Committee had been provided with the full data set that had been submitted to the school improvement partnership. That partnership had a good level of engagement from headteachers and examined what action could be taken in light of the data to achieve improvement.

The dcw noted that a gap in attainment between pupils eligible for free school meals and other pupils was a feature across the country.

Where a school's performance diminished the hla confirmed that the local authority did have discussions with the relevant school, including academies, and the Regional Schools commissioner. The cabinet member confirmed he was aware of correspondence with schools on performance issues. It would be counterproductive for this information to be in the public domain. However, he could assure the committee that the authority was challenging performance. He noted that it needed to be borne in mind in this context that the dedicated resource allocated to school improvement consisted of 1.6 fte staff. This was a small resource to advise over 100 institutions. In response to a question he commented that whilst no additional resource was being sought clearly more resource afforded greater scope.

(p29) It was noted in relation to attainment by school type that appendix 1 to the report on key stage 1 attainment stated that *"there are differences in attainment in the individual subjects – in every subject attainment is highest in free schools, then converter academies and lowest in sponsored academies. This reflects that many sponsored academies were low performing schools before becoming an academy and converter academies were usually high performing schools before becoming an academy. Despite the change in the expected standard, the different school types have maintained similar relative positions."* It was suggested that as the transition to sponsored academy status had not achieved the change in performance that it had been claimed would be achieved this subject warranted consideration as a spotlight review.

The Chairman thanked the statutory co-optees for their contribution to the debate and to the work of the Committee in recent years, noting that with the formation of the children

and young people scrutiny committee statutory education scrutiny powers would be discharged by that committee, not the general scrutiny committee.

RESOLVED:

- That
- (a) it be requested that In future reports performance data is also provided in a manner which allows the attainment of cohorts of pupils to be seen and understood;
 - (b) briefing notes be provided:
 - to confirm that the pupil premium is being used effectively;
 - on how the council provides support to the governance process in schools and the process by which this is delivered outlining any difference in approach in the support provided to maintained schools and academies.
 - on the current school funding position and the introduction of the national funding formula.
 - (c) the executive be requested that schools be reminded of the need to publicise information on how they are using the pupil premium
 - (d) it be requested that quantative analysis be provided in reports of the extent to which education provision is highly valued by children and young people, parents and carers, the community and employers indicating where areas of education provision are valued and where they are not valued.
 - (e) a spotlight review of the trend in performance of sponsored academies be proposed for consideration in the work programme session in June.

77. DRAFT WORK PROGRAMME AND TASK AND FINISH GROUPS

The committee considered its work programme and related scrutiny activities.

The Chairman closed the formal meeting noting that an informal session would follow at which John Coleman would outline the plan for the scrutiny workshop on 5 June which will focus on the future work programme.

RESOLVED: That the draft work programme as set out at appendix 1 to the report be approved, noting that this would be considered at the scrutiny workshop on work programming on 5 June and account be taken of the proposal that a spotlight review of the trend in performance of sponsored academies be proposed for consideration in that work programme session.

78. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Tuesday 11 July 2017 (provisional)

The meeting ended at 12.20 pm

CHAIRMAN