

PRINCIPLES ON PROVISION OF EDUCATION IN HEREFORDSHIRE IN 21ST CENTURY

PORTFOLIO RESPONSIBILITY: CHILDREN'S SERVICES

CABINET

29TH NOVEMBER 2007

Wards Affected

County-wide

Purpose

To approve the principles to guide the future pattern of provision of education in Herefordshire in the 21st Century and to endorse the next steps in the review process.

Key Decision

This is a Key Decision because it is likely to result in the Council incurring expenditure above agreed budgets for the service or function (shown as a line in the budget book) to which the decision relates but allowing for virements between budget heads and savings within budget heads of up to £500,000;

It was included in the Forward Plan.

Recommendations

That

- (a) the principles on which the strategic plan for the pattern of school provision should be based as set out in Appendix 1 be approved; and**
- (b) the process which involves draft proposals being published on 10th January 2008, consultation on the proposals until Friday 29th February, and a meeting of Cabinet in March 2008 to approve proposals be endorsed.**

Reasons

- (a) The principles paper has been amended to reflect many of the queries raised in the consultation period.
- (b) The review of school provision is a strategic piece of work, and Cabinet should confirm that the programme is to its satisfaction.

Further information on the subject of this report is available from
George Salmon – Head of Commissioning & Improvement on (01432) 26 0802

Considerations

Background

The review of school provision was agreed by Cabinet in the spring of 2006. The programme involving reviews on an area by area basis suffered delays and failed to address cross-county issues in a timely way. This has caused much frustration in schools. Under instruction from the new Director for Children's Services and new Cabinet Member, the review was re-launched by issuing a Principles Paper on which to base future proposals across the whole County. This approach has received universal support amongst schools. The debate has moved to the principle themselves, and how they will be applied. Although the paper was written in the context of falling rolls, it should also be applicable in the context of stable or even higher pupil numbers.

Eight principles were set out in the draft paper sent out for consultation i.e.

1. The aim should be to provide the best for all children and young people in Herefordshire;
2. There should be equity of provision for all children wherever they live in the County;
3. Maximum benefit is to be derived by partnership working between schools, parents/carers, and key agencies;
4. More diverse provision within a strategic framework in terms of status of school, specialism, age-range, and partnering arrangements should be seen as flexible means by which the needs of individual children in each area of the county can be met;
5. Strong leadership at Local Authority, School and Community level is essential to deliver continuing improvements in a changing world;
6. The interests of the more vulnerable and those with additional needs should be met through providing equal opportunities and making positive and proactive intervention;
7. Resources appropriate to teaching and learning in the 21st Century must be provided in terms of finance, staffing, teaching materials, equipment and accommodation;
8. All maintained schools in Herefordshire should continue to be part of a community of provision within a strategic framework.

Responses

In the initial consultation over fifty written replies were received. In addition the paper was discussed in meetings with Government Office West Midlands, Strategic Monitoring Committee, Children & Young People's Scrutiny Committee, the Children & Young People's Partnership Board, the Shadow Board, Hereford Association of Governors, Hereford Association of Secondary Headteachers, and Primary Headteachers. Copies of the responses have been placed in the Members Room, with the original draft Principles Paper.

There is no outright rejection of any principles, but some additional points were raised. GOWM suggests reference to the changing role of the Local Authority and greater emphasis on the wider children's agenda. Others point out the need to stress the role of the school in the community and the critical role of the parent and family in a child's life.

Clarification has been sought on what action would follow negative school OFSTED reports, querying the validity of that snapshot view in all circumstances, and noting that the Local Authority has a prime addressing underperformance.

Doubt has been thrown on the value of federated arrangements, but the principle of diversity is generally supported, especially linked to faith schools. Some have queried whether diverse provision will cause greater confusion to parents.

There is a general consent that the smallest school should be able to employ 3.5 FTE teachers, although an argument for the two class school is presented, with the emphasis on the close personal relationship developed between teacher and learners. The current widespread practice of partnership working was emphasised with one suggestion for further 'reward' for greater co-working.

On a matter of detail a journey time of 45 minutes for a primary aged child is seen as too long with 30 minutes suggested instead. At secondary level this is less of an issue with one thought that no restriction should be in place, and another suggesting that it is impractical for special schools.

It is interesting to note that young people on the Shadow Partnership Board were not concerned with travel time. They thought that the smallest schools did provide a limited experience, and had no hesitation in wanting quick action to resolve poor standards of teaching and learning.

The general reactions are summed up by such phrases as 'the aims of the draft are laudable', 'paper had some very good points', 'the principles reflect government policy and learning, and a general consensus among educationalists and hence can be endorsed'.

Unsurprisingly many of the responses pre-judge the next stage in the review process. There is a common concern over accuracy and availability of up-to-date data on future pupil numbers, and how the principles will be used to formulate proposals. At this point many felt that changes will be resource driven rather than principle led.

Next Stages

The principles have been amended in light of the comments received and the amended paper is attached as Appendix 1. If approved, proposals will be brought forward and announced on 10th January to schools with a full briefing offered to all Councillors on 11th January. The same presentations and information will be available to all meetings. Further discussion on the proposals will be undertaken particularly with the schools where change is proposed.

This is in line with the DCSF guidance and legal requirements on procedures to follow in cases of school reorganisation. There has to be discussion and informal consultation over initial proposals of any change that alters the character of a school, closes or ceases to maintain a school. If these proposals are to be taken forward, formal Council approval is required to publish statutory proposals that invite comments on the formal proposals. Cabinet will then have to decide if they wish to give final approval to the proposal set out in the statutory notice. In the past School Organisation Committees have been responsible for making the final local decision. However, the Education and Inspections Act 2006 abolished School Organisation Committees. The final decision now rests with the Council, albeit there is a right of appeal against the Council decision to the National Adjudicator.

To comply with the process, the following timetable is planned.

January 10 th	Announcement to Headteachers and Governors of draft proposals
January 11 th	Briefing for all Councillors
January 10 th - February 29 th	Informal Consultation on the proposals for change
March 27 th	Report to Cabinet seeking approval to formal proposals
April/May	Publication of Statutory Notices and Formal Consultation with regard to specific and individual schools

Financial Implications

The principles will shape how revenue will be used in the future. In the main, it will not influence the level of the Dedicated Schools Grant which is a direct function of pupil numbers.

If radical proposals emerge, there maybe a requirement to meet additional redundancy and transport costs. Fundamental change is also likely to require significant capital investment.

Risk Management

The principles paper attempts to set out clearly the basis on which future school provision should be made. To that extent it itself represents action to mitigate the impact of falling rolls on the future quality of education provision within the county and value for money.

Alternative Options

The review of school provision could proceed without a set of clearly stated principles and rely, as it has done previously, on policies set out in plans some years ago, and on policies emerging in response to new initiatives from the Department of Children’s School and Families.

Consultees

All Councillors
 All Headteacher and Governors in Herefordshire
 Hereford Diocese
 Archdiocese of Cardiff
 Hereford Association of Governors
 Teaching Professional bodies
 Children and Young People’s Partnership
 Shadow Partnership Board
 Government Office West Midlands

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Principles to Guide the Provision of Education in Herefordshire in the 21st Century

Background Papers

Written responses to Consultation Paper

Draft Paper ‘Principles to Guide the Provision of Education in Herefordshire in the 21st Century’