

THE GOVERNMENT'S FIVE YEAR STRATEGY FOR CHILDREN AND LEARNERS

PROGRAMME AREA RESPONSIBILITY: EDUCATION

CABINET

14TH OCTOBER, 2004

Wards Affected

County-wide

Purpose

To consider the range of proposals made in the *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners* published by the DfES in July 2004.

Key Decision

This is not a Key Decision

Recommendation

To consider the implications of the DfES Five Year Strategy for schools and local authorities, and to identify any implications for Herefordshire that might require further investigation or action in the coming period.

Reasons

The report is provided for initial consideration, though it may not be necessary to take immediate action.

Considerations

Overview

1. The Strategy Paper begins by reviewing the main strands of government policy since 1997, and highlights areas that it believes to have been particularly successful. The document then devotes an individual chapter to each of its main themes for Education, beginning with chapters on early years and primary education, and finishing with chapters on adult learning and higher education.
2. Each chapter of the Strategy reviews achievements since 1997, and outlines the government's intentions for the coming period. Individual proposals are sketched in briefly, with much of the detail left for further announcements. In a few cases, major policy papers are to be published in the autumn. Among the most important of these are –
 - *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* Programme which, among other matters, will go into more detail about 'Educare', a new term used by the DfES to describe the bringing together of nursery education and childcare into

Further information on the subject of this report is available from
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a single integrated offer for pre-school children

- The Tomlinson Report on 14-19 Education and Training, which will look closely at the system of examinations and qualifications for the age group
 - The Green Paper on Youth, based on joint work between the Home Office and the Department of Health, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the Social Exclusion Unit and the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit (Autumn 2004)
3. Although the Strategy document contains little that does not already exist or that has not already been signalled in previous announcements, it is none the less a significant statement of the government's medium and longer term intentions.
 4. Most noteworthy is the emphasis, which goes through many of the chapters, on the autonomy of individual schools. There is particular emphasis, in the chapter headed *Independent Specialist Schools*, on encouraging schools to take on greater levels of independence. The main vehicles for such autonomy are *foundation* schools, which currently largely comprise former grant maintained schools, and '*academies*', which are publicly funded schools outside the LEA system. Experience elsewhere (there are no foundation schools or academies in Herefordshire) suggest that such schools tend to engage less well with the inclusion and diversity agendas. It may be significant that *Every Child Matters*, which focuses on inclusion and diversity, is only a minor theme in the strategy document, except in the chapter on Early Years which is largely about the pre-school sector.
 5. Alongside the emphasis on school autonomy, there is corresponding emphasis on directing or limiting the role of local authorities. Two extracts from the text illustrate the intentions –

However, the government will not stand by and allow local authorities to sustain failure by refusing to engage with academies where they can meet parental demands for good school places. Where necessary we will use existing powers – and seek any additional powers necessary – to hold local authorities to their responsibilities.
[Strategy document, Chapter 4, paragraph 37].

At all levels – under 5s, primary, secondary and post-16 – local authorities should recast themselves as the Commissioner and Quality Assurer of Educational Services, not the direct supplier, a role which enables them to promote the interests of parents and pupils far more confidently and powerfully than the old days of the Local Authority as direct manager of local schools and colleges.
[Strategy document, Chapter 4, paragraph 48].

6. The proposals, outlined below, to limit local authority discretion on Education spending also indicate the approach clearly.
7. A summary of the Strategy has been produced by the Education Network. A copy of that summary is available on request.

Detailed implications of proposals for Herefordshire

8. There are several areas in which Herefordshire may be affected significantly by the policy intentions described in the Strategy.

Control of local authority spending on Education

9. Further controls are to be placed on local budgeting for Education. The two significant paragraphs are worth reproducing –

... The introduction of a dedicated school budget will have the same effect, ending the annual wrangle over the quantum of resources for schools between central and local government. With the funding for schools assured, local authorities can concentrate fully on their strategic and quality ensuring functions in education. It will also still be open to them to spend more on education locally than the national allocation, where they wish to do so in support of local schools and parents. [Strategy document, Chapter 4, part of paragraph 51.]

... No authority will receive less funding for education than its current level of spending, and we will seek to ensure that there are no adverse effects for the rest of local government. Funding will continue to be channelled through local authorities, though they will not be able to divert this spending for other purposes. Local authorities will deliver the national guarantee of extra funding to schools each year, but will retain an important and necessary role in reflecting local needs and circumstances. [Strategy document, Chapter 4, part of paragraph 13.]

10. It is clear that the proposals remove the last vestiges of local decision about minimum Education budget levels, though in practice very few authorities in recent years have felt able to use their existing powers to set Education budgets below the EFSS level. It is hard to see how such direct government control will not continue to affect the rest of local government adversely, especially given the scale of the promised future increases for schools.
11. A welcome change within the proposals is the intention to align school budgets with the school year. Since 1988, the DfES have steadily resisted that suggestion, which has been made frequently by schools and local authorities, and have previously allowed such an arrangement only with colleges and grant maintained schools when they were no longer funded through local authorities, and with DfES Standards Fund grants. The new approach, therefore, may reflect the greater degree of control that the government intends to have over local education spending.

School Budgets

12. The Strategy proposes that *we will provide guaranteed three-year budgets for every school, geared to pupil numbers, with every school also guaranteed a minimum per pupil increase every year* [Strategy, Chapter 4, paragraph 11].
13. Budgets would still be channelled through LEAs who would continue to decide the local budget formula and other matters in consultation with the Schools Forum. However, the proposed system of minimum percentage increases for every school would make it more difficult to adjust the local formula **weightings** as between different age groups and schools. Such adjustments have always been an important feature of local planning of formula funding. It would be more difficult, for example, to reduce the very large differential between the funding of primary and secondary education. It would also be more difficult to go forward with a proposal that Herefordshire has been looking at to relate the funding formula for primary schools more closely to class size requirements.

14. In advance of the more fundamental change from 2006, which would be subject to further consultation, the government have announced minimum requirements for 2005/2006. The government intends to set the Schools Formula Spending Share (SFSS) at a minimum level of 5.5%, with an average increase of around 7%. Within this total, the minimum per pupil increases for schools have been set at 4% for secondary and special schools, and (to allow for the greater impact of the teachers' workload agreement) at 5% for primary schools. The Secretary of State *will expect LEAs to passport the full SFSS increase through to their Schools Budget in 2005/06, unless there are wholly exceptional circumstances.* In addition, the Secretary of State has confirmed that the 4% increase will also apply to the government's direct funding of schools. Such direct funding includes –
- (i) Standards Fund which comprises grants paid through LEAs for specified national initiatives.
 - (ii) School Standards Grant, which is in the form of general allocation to each school calculated on a simple national formula based on a flat rate per school and an amount per pupil, with a further £500 (5%) of further support for **very small** nursery and primary schools
 - (iii) the LSC funding rates for school sixth forms.

Early Years

15. Early Years provision has changed more radically in the last few years than any other area of education. The government, and its immediate predecessor, enhanced the priority for pre-school education and care, and Herefordshire has now established a substantial and generally high quality base involving in the main private and voluntary provision from which to deal with further proposals.
16. The particular proposal for a Children's Centre for all children in the 20% most deprived wards in England is a challenging one. However, the County is already well on the way towards it, with the many new developments in South Wye (Marlbrook, the Hundertons, and St. Martin's), and a Sure Start Programme in Leominster and Kington areas. At present these developments use specific Revenue and Capital grants but in future their costs will have to be met through normal annual budgets.
17. The County is well placed to develop new provision and respond to innovation through its well-established early years team, and through the co-ordinated Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership, which guides the development of provision across the County.

Primary and SEN Policies

18. The proposals in these areas are very close to existing working practice. Herefordshire is already well placed to respond effectively to further development of existing strategies because of the high quality and inclusive practice of Herefordshire schools (more than 80% categorised as 'good' or 'better' and none classed as unsatisfactory). The local inspection and advisory service, which includes many members with previous headship or other senior school experience, is also well organised, with reshaping taking place following the recent Best Value review. The service is well focused on the quality and standards agenda, in support of schools, who are developing good capacity for effective self-evaluation.

Secondary

19. The Strategy sets out a wide range of proposals for developing secondary schools. The main themes are changes in the secondary curriculum, and the opportunities for schools to become more autonomous.

Curriculum and Pastoral

20. The relevant Chapter focuses on changes that are mostly already in place or previously signalled. They include better arrangements for pupil progress from primary school to secondary school, including co-ordinated admission arrangements which Herefordshire introduced at the beginning of the current school year. There is a reiteration of the focus on curriculum strategy for the whole of Key Stage 3, with a promise to develop that further into a Strategy for the whole 11-16 age range. There are also reiterated declarations of support for programmes for “gifted and talented” students, for low achieving pupils from minority ethnic groups, and for pupils with SEN. There is also mention of the importance of ICT in developing personalised learning, and a focus too on wider curriculum opportunities for the older age groups (here there is some mention of the overlap with the 14-19 Review). The focus on improving pupil behaviour and attendance is also reiterated.
21. Herefordshire is well placed to deal with this broad agenda, which has been developing strongly over the last 5 years. The County is well placed partly because of the strength of its high schools, and the clear focus that the Inspection and Advisory Service has on this area of work. Members of the local team have current or recent experience as Ofsted inspectors, and are well qualified to assess school quality and identify local strategies for improving individual schools.

Foundation Schools

22. The Strategy states the government’s aim of allowing all secondary schools – other than those that are failing – to take on the powers of foundation schools and aided schools. Such schools together already comprise 1/3rd of the secondary schools in England. (In Herefordshire the proportion is lower – there are 2 voluntary aided high schools, no foundation schools, and 12 community schools). Foundation schools would own their own land and buildings, be the employer of their own staff, administer their own admission arrangements (within the rules of the National Code of Practice) and have the freedom to establish a charitable foundation or take on a faith sponsor. The Strategy document states that the procedure to acquire foundation status will become simpler, with a brief period of consultation, followed by a simple vote of the governing body. The proposal would be subject to further legislation which might be questioned closely. Transfers of ownerships of premises and transfers of staff to new employers are not matters that can normally be resolved without formality or reasonable periods of consultation.
23. Schools can already acquire foundation status after a period of public consultation on formal notices and following a vote of the governing body. Almost all current foundation schools nationally are former grant maintained schools whose position was altered by the Education Act 1998. To date, schools in Herefordshire have shown little interest in such an opportunity. Their main concern has been that the enhanced powers carry with them corresponding responsibilities which add to the complexity and workloads required of managers and governing bodies. Herefordshire schools have also valued the support received from the Local Authority.

24. It may be, therefore, that the position will not change significantly in Herefordshire, unless there are significant financial benefits from foundation status and/or schools judge that the support received from the Local Authority is of diminishing value. If there should be a trend towards schools adopting foundation status, it could make it more difficult to maintain the County's existing strength of social inclusion in school, notwithstanding the continuing responsibility of the Local Authority to co-ordinate admission arrangements. Although foundation schools would not be able to adopt selection by ability, they could alter admission policies – for example, in ways that would weaken the community basis underlying the County's current admissions priorities for community schools.

Academy Status

25. The Strategy sets a target for there to be 200 independently managed academies by 2010, compared with the current number of 12, and a further 5 by September 2004. Another 30 academies are stated to be *in progress*. Such schools would be created only in areas of low educational standards and social disadvantage. Academies would be all-ability schools with *a dedication to transforming educational standards, with the freedom to innovate as they wish within the law and requirements on admissions*.
26. The impact of such schools would necessarily be limited. In Herefordshire, for example, only the South Wye part of the County, with one high school, would fall within the current eligibility threshold of being in the top 20% of wards nationally with the highest levels of social deprivation.

Specialist Schools

27. The Strategy sets a target for 95% of all high schools nationally to become specialist schools by 2008. Such schools would teach the full National Curriculum, and have all the other features that high schools must have. However, they would also develop a *Centre of Excellence* in one area of the curriculum, and share the benefits of such expertise with a partner high school, the related primary schools and the local community. At the point at which specialist schools come up for *re-designation* at the end of 4 years, they would be able all to take on a second specialism for the following period, with additional funding to assist such development.
28. The 95% target is one that has a good chance of being realised. Within Herefordshire, 7 schools have already achieved specialist status, and 2 more are Beacon Schools, and all other high schools are working towards such status in the coming period. It is unlikely, however, that one of the stated benefits of specialist status – enhancement of local parental choice – would be achieved in Herefordshire, because of the County's size and widely scattered population. Specialist status does not of itself carry additional powers.

Foundation Partnerships

29. The Strategy refers briefly to the intention that *high performing specialist schools* should play a leading role in new foundation partnerships designed to develop curriculum and teaching training improvements in their locality. Such partnerships are already a feature of specialist schools, and there are some very good current examples within the County, including among primary schools.

Expansion of individual schools

30. The Strategy also reiterates existing arrangements under which *popular schools* will

be able to expand their intakes, subject to capital funding. 11-16 high schools are also able to make proposals to establish a school sixth form, or to enter into a partnership for the provision of some 16-19 Education with colleges and other providers of 16-19 Education.

31. It is possible that such opportunities will lead to some proposals being made by individual schools, though the County's schools generally have so far taken a cautious judgement of the practical benefits of expanding beyond their current intakes. Proposals for Post-16 Education would have to make sense in the Herefordshire context, and would require consultation with all relevant partners including the Learning and Skills Council for Hereford and Worcester through which the relevant capital and revenue support are currently channelled.

Building Schools for the Future

32. The Strategy restates the national commitment, under *Building Schools for the Future*, to replace or refurbish every secondary school by 2020. The Strategy states that, *later this year*, all LEAs will be informed about the phase they are likely to be in.

14-19 Education and Training

33. The Strategy document targets a number of further improvements, that build on existing elements and trends -
 - increasing the number of adults with a Level 2 qualification (i.e. GCSE or equivalent)
 - development of employer-based training pilots with colleges and training providers
 - at least 400 centres of vocational excellence nationally
 - establishment of a new quality improvement body
34. The Strategy highlights the Tomlinson Review on the shape of 14-19 Education and Training, and also promises a Green Paper on Youth for the autumn 2004. Specific targets for 2008 include raising the proportion of 16 year olds achieving 5 good GCSEs or equivalent to 60% (Herefordshire is already very close to that level), developing vocational education for 14-16 year olds and supporting young people leaving care.

Conclusion

35. The Strategy provides a significant statement of the government's intentions. Many of the proposals are ones on which there will be widespread support. Such proposals cover the programmes to improve further provision for early years, raise the standards achieved by schools and students, including the contribution to be made by specialist schools, and the major changes expected in the 14-19 curriculum.
36. The government's aspirations for a high proportion of schools to take on more autonomous forms of school organisation must be more uncertain. This is not the first time that government has attempted to achieve such outcomes by exhortation – the example, the earlier efforts to encourage schools to become grant-maintained, which had mixed results nationally. There is much evidence to suggest that schools

generally have reservations about taking on the heavier responsibilities that go with the offered forms of autonomy, preferring to concentrate their efforts on their central purpose for existence – the education and welfare of children and young people. Much will depend on how well local authorities continue to provide relevant support and credible professional leadership for the service within the new arrangements for Children's Services.

Alternative Options

There are no alternative options at this stage.

Risk Management

Not applicable at this stage.

Consultees

Not applicable at this stage.

Background Papers

None identified.