

BEST VALUE REVIEW OF SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS PROVISION AND SUPPORT SERVICES - STAGE 3 REPORT

Report By: Director of Education

Wards Affected

County-wide

Purpose

1. To consider and approve the Stage 3 report and outcomes of the Best Value Review of Special Educational Needs (SEN) Provision and Support Services.

Financial Implications

2. The financial implications vary with each option for future provision. However, the preferred option is judged to be cost neutral.

Assessing Stage 3 Reports

3. In considering Stage 3 reports, responsibility rests with the Chair of the relevant Scrutiny Committee, supported by officers, to satisfy the Strategic Monitoring Committee that the requirements of the review process have been met. In doing so, the role of the Strategic Monitoring Committee is to ensure the robustness of the review process, rather than revisiting the detail of each review.

Background to the Review

4. The Best Value Review of SEN Provision and Support Services for Schools began in March 2003. The original scope of the Review covered the statutory assessment process, support for pupils with a statement and the contribution of educational psychology. After beginning their work, the review team considered that the remit was too narrow and the matter was referred back to Education Scrutiny Committee in July 2003. The recommendation to widen the Review was accepted. The Review was therefore extended to include the Learning Support Services (HLSS), and the services for students with physical and sensory impairments (PASS), and the service for students with medical and behavioural difficulties (MBSS). The completed Stage 3 report is enclosed separately for Members of the Committee and is available to the public on request.
5. The Review team comprised 2 Councillors, several Headteachers of primary, secondary and special schools, a Parent Governor, Organisers, the principal Educational Psychologist, and the Manager of each Service under review, representatives from the West Midlands Consortium for Travelling Children, Connexions, the West Midlands Regional SEN Partnership, Social Services and the Parent Partnership. The meetings were chaired by Dr. Susan Ferguson, Community Paediatrician from the Herefordshire Primary Care Trust.

6. On 5th October, 2004, the Education Scrutiny Committee considered the content of the Stage 3 report. It was agreed by the Committee that the Review's recommendation, set out at Section 10 of the review report, to maintain current provision but implement improvements be accepted.

Data Collection

7. A wide variety of data was collected (outlined in Sections 3, 4 and 5 of the review report). This included surveys of various user groups, including students with special needs and partner organisations. The effectiveness of the services was measured against performance benchmarks and compared with that of statistical neighbours. Value for money was measured through financial benchmarks and comparisons of performance data with statistical neighbours. Although financial information was relatively easy to obtain, there were issues about drawing firm conclusions as local authorities interpret special educational needs in a variety of ways.

Challenge

8. The services were challenged about how, and why, they were provided. In some cases, the service is a statutory obligation that must be maintained. In such cases, the services were challenged about how they could be improved for the benefit of students. Rigour was added by having an independent chair and through significant consultation with users and other stakeholders. The achievements of other authorities were also considered against the progress made by the services in Herefordshire.

Consultation

9. A comprehensive exercise was undertaken to gain the views of the stakeholders of the services. Consultees included students with SEN, parents and carers, schools, special educational needs co-ordinators, external partners such as Connexions and Social Services, and the staff members of the services under review.
10. To ensure that all points of view were obtained, several consultation methods were used selected for their appropriateness for the target group. For example, students with special educational needs were informally interviewed in small, self-chosen groups. A flexible set of questions was used to encourage open discussion during parent/carer interviews, and staff was consulted through a questionnaire to ensure anonymity.

Comparison

11. There was extensive use of performance information to compare the services provided in Herefordshire, both with statistical neighbours and with West Midland authorities. Consideration was also given to wide ranging data, including financial data, provided by the West Midlands SEN Regional Partnership.

Compete

12. Four options for provision of SEN services were considered:
 1. outsourcing to alternative providers
 2. sharing services with neighbouring Local Education Authorities

3. further delegating relevant budgets to schools
 4. maintaining the current provision but making those changes indicated during the review process.
13. After consideration, the Best Value Review group felt that option 4, maintaining the current provision but making those changes indicated during the review process, was most likely to lead to the improvements required. This was endorsed by the Education Scrutiny Committee. The reasons for this judgement are set in paragraph 9.1 of the review report:

“This option would retain the current strengths and good working relationships. It would also allow current initiatives, such as Banded Funding, to be fully implemented and monitored. However, the services do have some current weaknesses as shown by the consultation and research conducted as part of this review. It is felt that an improvement plan covering areas for improvement and focussing on those issues raised as being most significant during consultation would promote the improvement of the services to the stakeholders. Such improvements, although by no means easy, are within the capacity of the current services.”

Risk assessment

14. There is limited risk to the Authority in pursuing the agreed option. The good working relationships, knowledge of schools and pupils involved and the motivated staff would be retained. In addition, there is a good understanding of the current issues and areas for improvement. There is also a willingness within the services to make the necessary changes.

Process issues

15. There were no issues that arose during the review that impacted on the overall review process.

RECOMMENDATION

THAT the Committee endorse the recommendation of the Education Scrutiny Committee on the Stage 3 report of the Best Value Review of Special Educational Needs Provision and Support Services and refer the findings to the Cabinet Member (Education) for consideration.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Best Value Review of Special Educational Needs Provision and Support Services, Stage 3 Report