

CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY AND PERFORMANCE PANEL

TUESDAY 2 MARCH 2010 AT 6.00 P.M.

Panel Members Present

Councillor E Hughes (Chair)
Councillor L Beeley
Councillor A Paul
Councillor K Chambers
Councillor B Cassidy

Officers Present

Kay Child - Assistant Director, Children's Services
Frank Barnes – Assistant Managing Director, Serco
Alison Butcher – Building Schools for the Future, Project
Director
Chris Knowles – Lead Accountant
Anne Thompson – Head of Service, Vulnerable
Children

Invitees

Matthew Underhill – Scrutiny Officer

Liz Barratt, Head teacher, Caldmore Primary School
Vicki Russell, Head teacher, Delves Junior School

71/09 APOLOGIES

Apologies were received on behalf of Councillors E Pitt, R Martin, H Khan; Louise Hughes, Dave Jones, Ken Yeates, Paul Williams.

72/09 SUBSTITUTIONS

There were no substitutions for the duration of this meeting.

73/09 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest or party whip identified at this meeting.

74/09 MINUTES

Councillor Chambers raised the issue of the Council's school balances considered at the previous meeting explaining that he wanted to highlight to the Panel a review of balances to be undertaken by the Council's auditors, Grant Thornton, to determine whether they are at levels consistent with a recent Audit Commission report.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 20 JANUARY 2010, copies having previously circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

75/09 PUPIL ATTAINMENT

The Chair introduced the item explaining to the invitees, the Head teachers of Caldmore Primary and Delves Junior schools, that the Panel were keen to understand the challenges as well as the support that schools receive in seeking to raise standards. The key points of the discussion were as follows:

- The Head teacher of Caldmore Primary explained that there were 240 pupils at the school, together with a 52 place nursery. 98% of pupils are from ethnic minority backgrounds, with the majority from the local Bangladeshi community;
- As English is not the first language of pupils this creates a further challenge for the school when seeking to improve attainment. The Head teacher of Delves Junior explained that it was a school for Key Stage 2 pupils only, with 351 pupils made-up of 51% white British and the remaining 49% from ethnic minority backgrounds;
- Both Head teachers highlighted the importance of buy-in from parents in order to assist in improving attendance and attainment.
- They also explained that good practice aimed at improving attainment is shared between schools in a number of different ways, from formal meetings of local head teachers, informal groups which might develop across a cluster of schools within a particular geographical location or where heads have attended a course together. Other examples include where schools have joined together to access funding streams, or where one school has been asked to support another school in delivering a project. Good practice is also shared between head teachers using the Next Practice Network. For example, a number of schools within Brownhills had recently collaborated over a particular initiative The Assistant Managing Director, Serco explained that Children's Area Partnerships were a significant driver for collaboration across the whole schools agenda. Also, breakfast briefings are held each term with schools, which are valuable for highlighting to head teachers issues that will need to be broadcast to the entire school community, for example, in relation to child protection. . In addition a range of other support is provided for schools, including the promotion of leading practice, as well as opportunities for innovation; how to access funding, including support with funding bids;
- In relation to tackling the poor behaviour in schools the causal link with deprivation was highlighted, while poor often behaviour reflects the level of engagement a child receives from their family. The Head teacher of Caldmore Primary explained that a deprivation funding initiative had meant that the most vulnerable children were able to participate in extra curricular activities. The Head teachers also guided the Panel that 20% of pupils

received free school meals at Delves Junior, with 35% qualifying for them at Caldmore Primary;

- The Head teacher of Caldmore Primary acknowledged that poor behaviour was an issue in seeking to improve attainment. However, following the receipt of additional support and advice from a range of sources, including other schools, officers and partners, the school was now witnessing a rise in attainment. The Assistant Managing Director, Serco explained that often schools will have developed specialist skills within their support staff whose skills and experience can then be shared with other schools;
- In relation to exclusions the head teachers explained that while this represents an important element of the management of behaviour within schools much greater support is required by head teachers, who are largely responsible for what can be a lengthy and complex process. A Panel member observed that while schools are understandably reluctant to exclude a pupil because of the undesirable statistical impression this can create, it can be the case that exclusion is in a child's best interests if their needs are not being met within mainstream provision. If this action is taken at primary school level then there is a possibility they can be returned to mainstream education at secondary school level with issues having been identified and resolved. The alternative is that the education of this child together with its classmates at both primary and secondary level is negatively impacted. The Assistant Managing Director, Serco acknowledged that it was the specific circumstances that dictated whether exclusion was the appropriate course of action. A number of challenges exist around behaviour in relation to improving outcomes and school performance at all levels with limited flexibility in the curriculum to make extra provision. A number of national recommendations have been incorporated into new guidance for the Children's and Young People Plan, for example, including specific details around how support will be provided for pupils with special needs as well as how behaviour and attainment in schools will be improved. In addition, all secondary schools are required to work in behaviour and attainment partnerships and report on how they are jointly tackling these issues to the Children's Trust;
- The head teachers explained that in terms of some of the other challenges faced in improving attainment it was critical that schools had high quality teaching staff, with the calibre of teachers notably improving in recent years. However, difficulties remained in terms of attracting people to the profession, particularly men. This was for a number of different reasons including the pressures associated with teaching as well as an often changing and developing curriculum to deliver against. For example, schools are now having to develop 1:1 tuition for pupils who are currently not meeting required standards of reading and writing. As an example of the demanding curriculum requirements faced by schools the head teachers referred Panel members to **The Extra Mile Phase II 2009-10, Primary Handbook**, which can be found at <http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk>. A Panel member suggested that a shared resource of specialist support staff could be developed to support this requirement;
- The head teachers explained that links had been developed between their schools and local secondary schools to support the transition of pupils from

primary to secondary school. This includes familiarisation visits to secondary schools for pupils, staff visits to schools, sessions with support staff from secondary schools, as well as joint-school trips and projects;

- The head teachers explained that the introduction of Early Years Provision for three and four olds of fifteen hours per week from September 2010 was causing a number of difficulties. The increase in the number of hours of provision will impact on staff. For example, staff have to be given a one hour lunch break while the standard of provision must remain unaltered meaning that sufficiently qualified staff will have to be in place over lunch periods.

76/09 SNEYD COMMUNITY COLLEGE

The Assistant Managing Director, Serco explained that implementation of an Interim Executive Board (IEB) had been approved by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). The membership of the IEB includes an independent chair with PCT senior management experience Chair, together with a group comprising a secondary and primary head, a head of service from WCS-Serco and a parent from the school.. With these governance arrangements now in place the IEB will be responsible for planning and managing the school and site:

The main points of the briefing and subsequent discussion were as follows:

- There will be no Year 7 admission in September 2010, while Year 9 pupils will be transferring to an alternative school at the same point;
- There are also a number of issues regarding the site post-closure in 2011. For example, there is significant community usage, including use of some buildings and sports pitches. The IEB will now begin planning for how the site will be managed, including the potential closure of some buildings, in the long-term in parallel with the school closure programme. The Portfolio Holder explained that a report in relation to Sneyd will be taken to Cabinet in tandem with the University Technical College (UTC) proposal which will seek to create an approach for the future of the site, including include support for leisure facilities;
- Officers agreed with the Panel that the briefing to the next Panel meeting would include further details on a number of key issues, including: which schools will be invited to take Year 9 pupils from Sneyd; the number of staff redundancies; the impact of declining pupil numbers in terms of the financial viability of the school; information regarding financial assistance in meeting the cost of pupils transferring to other schools, including transport and uniforms; as well as guidance regarding efforts to maintain sibling groups.

RESOLVED:

That a detailed written briefing is provided to the next Panel meeting

regarding Sneyd School and the associated issues as outlined above.

77/09 BUILDING SCHOOLS FOR THE FUTURE (BSF)

The Project Director introduced the briefing (annexed) explaining that it provided an update in relation to the ongoing Transforming Learning in Walsall programme. The main points of the briefing and subsequent discussion were as follows:

- The draft Strategy for Change Part 2 (SfC2) has been produced as a two part document which sets out how it is proposed to implement the educational and physical transformation set out in Strategy for Change Part 1 (SfC1);
- In parallel with this process schools have been encouraged to write their own strategies for change;
- Site feasibility work has been undertaken with professional advisers, for example, to determine if the proposed re-modelling of a school would mean it could still fit on its current site. The review has also sought to identify any potential issues in relation to ensuring that proposals meet BSF requirements;
- The affordability of the BSF programme is also being assessed in order of magnitude. This has included developing an outline business case which, following significant consultation with schools during term-time, has been taken to the Partnership for Schools (PfS);
- The current work with schools includes school visits by the Client Design Adviser (CDA) together with the Technical advisers and Transforming Learning Advisers as part of the Vision to Reality process. This has involved challenging schools on their educational transformation programme and how this correlates with the curriculum and encouraging the head teachers, as well as teachers of schools within Wave 6a to use BSF as a catalyst for change, including ensuring that planned designs effectively map-out the vision for their schools. For example, ensuring that buildings and open spaces are fully-utilised to support effective learning. This activity has been used to reinforce work being undertaken with schools by the Technical Advisers on physical alterations to buildings and the associated control options. For example, the development of a school building that reflects the need to be able to deliver the curriculum of the future, for example, an adaptive teaching environment;
- The activity of assisting schools in identifying new ways to deliver the curriculum has also involved “Seeing is Believing” visits to schools in Derbyshire where innovative approaches have been developed. In addition, an Arts and Culture stakeholder group for Walsall has also been established, while this is not a requirement of Wave 6a it has been recognised that it is important that the local BSF process is informed by this agenda;
- Work had also been undertaken to encourage the active involvement of year 7 pupils. This has included establishing 7up Young People Voice panels in each Wave 6a school, as well as working with other pupils from these schools in projects and other activity in support of their own schools

- strategy for change.
- A Panel Member referred to her recent involvement with a BSF peer review process. The Project Director explained that the review could be seen as a risk management exercise and had assessed how prepared the Council is to deliver the programme. It had highlighted ten recommendations which the BSF team would need to meet in order to ensure delivery of the scheme to the next gateway. This included increasing the resources of the BSF team to support the delivery of the outline business case, increased governance of the process, including a strengthened relationship with Cabinet. Officers agreed to bring further details of the review, its recommendations and related action plan to the Panel's next meeting.

RESOLVED:

That further details of the review, its recommendations and related action plan is presented to the Panel's next meeting.

78/09 QUARTERLY FINANCIAL MONITORING

The Lead Accountant introduced the report (annexed) explaining that it highlighted a forecast net revenue overspend of £2.5m. The main points of the briefing and subsequent discussion were as follows:

- The most significant variance is within Safeguarding and Looked After Children (LACs). This is due to a range of costs, for example, those incurred during care proceedings, including supporting the right of each parent to supervised access to their children, as well as other associated costs such as transport;
- Other headlines include an overspend for Education which was due to a higher level of redundancies than was anticipated based on the experience of previous years. Whereas within Universal Services high demand remains around certain areas, including Direct Payments and Family Support. However, some savings have been achieved to offset cost pressures, as well as action to maximise use of grant income and vacancy management. Elsewhere, within Catering Services an under-spend of £0.076m was noted. This was as a result of increased depot charges being offset by increased income and savings on non essential expenditure;
- In terms of financial risks, the numbers of LACs, which currently stand at 498, continues to have the ongoing potential to rise and further increase service costs. In addition, the associated care costs can vary considerably depending on individual need. In response to a query from the Chair, the Lead Accountant explained that it was very difficult to predict the likely trajectory of numbers of LACs. The Head of Service, Vulnerable Children and the Assistant Director explained that there are high number of children at present with Protection Plans and in many cases these will become LACs. It is likely that the increase in LACs is due to a range of issues including, better awareness of domestic violence, patterns of abusive behaviour repeated through generations of the same family, as well as

significant child protection cases elsewhere in the country. However, recent research by Barnados would suggest that in fact the number of LACs should be expected to be 480 – 490. Early intervention action is being deployed to reduce number of LACs, although this take time to bear fruit.

- Costs have also continued to rise as it is now councils rather than Courts who are responsible for the provision of contact between parents and children during court proceeding, while court fees have also increased. A national review of court fees is currently underway and as part of that process it will be important for councils to be realistic regarding what they can and cannot deliver. As part of the effort to mitigate against rising costs, work continues to increase levels of fostering and adoption. However, the service faces continual pressures, for example, there are many junior social workers who are required to have limited caseloads while they are training;
- In relation to the Capital Programme, a strategic analysis is currently underway to determine how to best use capital to use this facility or consider alternative premises.

79/09 WORK PROGRAMME 2009/10

The work programme and forward plan were noted

80/09 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Chair confirmed the date of the next meeting as the 15 April 2010.

The meeting terminated at 8:02 pm