



EDUCATION FOR LIFE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH ON 11TH DECEMBER 2012 AT 5:00PM

PRESENT:

Councillor W. David - Chairman
Councillor D.W.R. Preece - Vice-Chairman

Councillors:

P.J. Bevan, H.R. Davies, C. Durham, C. Gordon, D. Havard, M.P. James, G. Johnston, J. Pritchard, D. Rees, J.E. Roberts, R. Saralis, Mrs M.E. Sargent.

Cabinet Member for Education and Leisure: Mrs R. Passmore

Together with:

S. Aspinall (Corporate Director Education and Lifelong Learning), B. Hopkins (Assistant Director, Our Schools Our Future, 21st Century Schools, K. Cole (Interim Manager, Learning, Education and Inclusion), S. Davies (EAS) and E. Sullivan (Committee Services Officer).

Co-opted Members: Mr M. Western (Cardiff ROC), Mr A. Farina Childs (Parent Governor) and Mrs A. Goss (Parent Governor)

APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors D.M. Gray, Mrs G.D. Oliver, D. Rees

CHAIRMAN'S ADDRESS

The Chairman welcomed Mr Martyn Western representing the Cardiff ROC Archdiocesan Commission for Education to his first meeting of the Education for Life Scrutiny Committee.

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

A declaration of interest was received at the beginning of the meeting as follows: Mrs A. Goss, details are minuted with the respective item.

REPORTS OF OFFICERS

Consideration was given to the following reports: -

2. ESTYN INSPECTION REPORT

Mrs A. Goss declared a personal interest in that she works for one of the partner agencies (EOTAS) noted in within the Inspection Report

The Director of Education introduced the presentation on the Estyn Inspection Report. The inspection looked at the quality of local authority education services for children and young people set around 3 key questions and two overall judgements. Overall judgements were based on current performance and prospects for improvement, with Estyn using a four-point scale to award judgements as: 'excellent', 'good', 'adequate' and 'unsatisfactory'. Member's attention was drawn to the descriptors for each of the points.

Current Performance

The inspection found 'current performance' to be adequate (strengths outweigh areas for improvement). Members were advised of the key drivers for the adequate rating and noted that in 2011, two thirds of secondary schools were below average and in key stages 3 and 4 and there were too many schools in the bottom quarter for important performance indicators when compared to similar schools on the free-school-meal benchmarks. Officer's acknowledged the issues within KS3 and KS4 and confirmed that improvements had been made, with an 11% point improvement noted at KS3 and likewise KS4 had improved to 64% against the All Wales Target.

The inspection report found that secondary schools had not been consistently held to account for their performance and as a result improvement in some schools had been too slow, fixed terms exclusions of five or less days had risen and since the 2009, there had been little progress in reducing the significant number of surplus places in both secondary and primary schools. Members were advised that schools were being challenged in terms of performance and tailored support had been provided to targeted schools and as a result improvements had been seen. Officers confirmed that extensive work had been done with regard to exclusions and attendance and a report detailing the progress made would be brought back the Scrutiny Committee. The issues concerning surplus places were acknowledged and Officer's confirmed that a plan had been developed but had not yet been acted upon.

In terms of what went well, the report found that when the performance of Caerphilly schools was compared with that of similar schools, based on the percentage eligible for free school meals, it was above average in KS1 and KS2 and there had also been improvements at KS4 over the last four years and in 2011 the authority had met the two main benchmarks for KS4.

The report also commented on the effective processes for the early identification of pupils with additional learning needs and the success achieved in reducing the number of young people not in education, employment or training.

The current performance judgements were noted and Members questions were welcomed.

Clarification was sought with regard to the reasons for the failure at KS3 and what action was being taken to address the issue. Members were advised that the issues at KS3 and KS4 had been recognised prior to the inspection and confirmed that intensive work had been done with headteachers to target children requiring support. Leadership issues were also being addressed and the effective use of data encouraged. The monitor, challenge and support process had been revised making it more challenging to secondary schools and improvements had been noted. The EAS was also working on a range of factors to improve those areas identified.

Officers emphasised the intensive nature of the work required and advised that with the change to support processes at a secondary level, improvements were being seen. However it was vital that this key support be sustainable and fully embedded within schools and then positive outcomes would be evident. Members were advised that this process had been applied across Wales and as Caerphilly improved so did the rest of Wales.

Capacity to Improve

The inspection report found 'capacity to improve' to be adequate (strengths outweigh areas for improvement). It noted that target setting and self-evaluation was not consistently robust and challenging, corporate and statutory partnership planning processes were not aligned, progress against recommendations from previous inspections had been inconsistent, elected members had not acted quickly enough with regard to the secondary school modernisation strategy and do not challenge underperformance in schools robustly enough and finally the Local Service Board was yet to develop the capacity to hold others to account.

Officers advised that work was ongoing at a corporate level and this had been picked up with the policy and performance unit to identify how the system fits into the bigger picture. The Directorate was working with Partners to secure a single planning process. Members were advised that surplus places had been an issue raised across all judgements and had affected the outcomes noted within the report.

Clarification was sought as to the make-up of the Local Service Board and Officer's confirmed this was made up of the Chief Executive, Aneurin Bevan Health Board, Voluntary Sector, Chief Constable and Welsh Government. It was noted that no framework was currently in place with regard to partnership accountability but work was ongoing with the Corporate Centre and the Service Board with regard to a single plan.

The report acknowledged that the Senior Leadership within the Directorate was strong and noted good practice in the support provided to schools, planning and educational outcomes, that projects and strategies at a service level added value to the Directorate's work, there was improved alignment with performance management and effective financial management of educational services.

Clarification was sought as to why the issue of surplus places remained unaddressed. Officers confirmed that during the 2005 inspection Bedwellty school was due to close and again in 2007 St Ilan was also closed but neither closure was taken into consideration by the Inspector, if the judgement had been based on present performance the authority would fall within the average on both primary and secondary places. Members were advised that an action plan and timeline for surplus places was coming forward from Welsh Government and this would drive the issue forward.

Members sought clarification as to why improvement at some secondary schools was noted to be slow. Officer's confirmed that processes had been changed and System Leaders introduced through the EAS to identify issues and further challenge practice. Members were advised that the work of System Leaders would be quality assured by the Local Authority.

Members expressed the concern that good practice was not being highlighted within reports and should be taken forward. Officers were clear that there were areas of excellent practice and this must be harnessed and shared, the importance of using pupil level data and challenging schools was emphasised.

Members requested that copies of presentations to the Scrutiny Committee be sent with meeting reports, as this would give them more time to assess the information coming forward. Officer's confirmed that this would be introduced.

Members also requested that when the report on KS4 came forward that it reflect the improvements seen as well as the interventions introduced and this be repeated for the other key stages in order to give a more rounded view of the progress made.

Recommendations

In order to secure the improvements required Estyn made 5 recommendations. The recommendations were detailed for Member's information and it was noted that R1 and R2 would be under the remit of the EAS. Officer's confirmed that the authority had 50 working days to submit an action plan in response to the recommendations, however the Directorate was still awaiting a visit from Estyn in order to shape the plan which they would then monitor. The finalised plan would be brought back to Members in the New Year.

Action Plan

Mr S. Davies of the EAS outlined the strategies for school improvement under recommendations R1 and R2 of the draft action plan.

In order to improve outcomes for learners at KS3 and KS4 the EAS will agree with schools targets and actions for pupils with FSM and LAC and other identified vulnerable groups. The action plan would also look at implementing tracking systems to enable the progress made to be monitored and evaluated. Strategies for raising levels of boys' achievement and reduce the gap in performance with girls would be further embedded and the SEWC literacy strategy would be implemented. The strategy would focus on underachieving schools at key stages 3 and 4 in English, building on the local Skills Strategy by developing specialist and outstanding teachers, effective assessment, moderation and interventions.

In terms of R2 the EAS focus would be on strengthening the level of challenge to secondary schools. Implementing an intervention framework that identifies the characteristics of school performance and agree with them clear and concise intervention plans that address weaknesses and share good practice. EAS would also work with Senior Officers to ensure appropriate intervention when schools do not improve and take timely, positive action to improve these schools quickly.

Members sought clarification as to the role of specialist teachers and how they would be deployed. Mr Davies confirmed that sharing good practice, including the use of specialist teachers would be vital to improving standards in both literacy and numeracy. However getting the balance right as to how best to share practice, whether this is within a teacher's own school or going school to school would be just as important. The EAS would work closely with schools and governors to ensure there is no negative impact.

The 'sharing' and role of School Governors was discussed at length and Members were advised that this did not form part of this strategy.

Clarification was sought as to what action could be taken if schools continued to underachieve despite interventions and processes being put in place. Mr Davies confirmed that the local authority had statutory powers under these circumstances and would decide the level of intervention required including the ability to challenge capability if necessary.

The strategies for R3 and R4 were outlined by the Manager for Education and Inclusion.

Members were advised that all targets would be reviewed to ensure the focus was on standards, particularly at KS3-KS4 and would be monitored to ensure continuous improvement and sustainability. Schools would be supported in setting qualitative targets based on individual children and their prior attainment and they would be encouraged to look at more creative ways of meeting needs and obtaining a higher level of performance. Identifying where vulnerable groups are and introducing suitable interventions to target support for individual children.

Internal processes including the current planning cycle would be drawn together and would incorporate a schedule of self-evaluation activities and timescales. Members were advised that further reports on the results of the self-evaluation process would be coming forward in due course. The importance of sharing successes as well as areas for development was noted and it was agreed that these also needed to be recognised going forward.

Clarification was sought in relation to a reference made within the report on initiatives. Officer's confirmed that they were also seeking clarification from Estyn regarding this, as the Lead Inspector had been very complimentary about the Skills Strategy.

Clarification was sought as to any guidance given to schools on the setting of targets. Officers confirmed that schools set their own targets at an individual pupil level, however they would challenge and debate them with schools.

In terms of R4, Members were advised that new planning cycle would be introduced from 1st April 2013 to ensure alignment with the Single Plan, there would also be a review of the level of engagement of key staff working within multi-agency groups and boards, ensuring that partnership working is effective in raising standards for children and young people.

The Assistant Director of Our Schools Our Future outlined the strategies to reduce surplus capacity in schools.

It was noted that Estyn had used the All Wales data for January 2011 for the basis of their recommendations. Current analysis showed that Caerphilly was average at primary and secondary levels, however it was clear that surplus places were decreasing at a primary level and increasing at a secondary level.

In January 2011 primary surplus places stood at 21.4%, in September 2012 there were at 17.5% and were projected to be at 11.3% in September 2015, showing a significant reduction. Whereas secondary places stood at 16.7% in January 2011, 21.7% in September 2012 and are projected to be at 29.5% by September 2022. It was also noted that English medium education will see a reduction of 1000 pupils and Welsh medium education will see an increase in 1000 pupils by January 2015, a significant shift in numbers.

Officer's confirmed that the data in the action plan would be updated to reflect the 2012/2013 positions and a detailed capacity review would be undertaken. Schools would be asked how they use classrooms and report any changes and information provided would be challenged in order to ensure its accuracy. The end of the Spring Term 2013 would see this completed.

The SOP2 process and its three priorities were confirmed for Members information. Officers were mindful that Welsh Government has yet to guarantee any monies coming forward.

The St Ilan site development had commenced statutory processes and was on line for a 2013 intake. Members were advised that Ysgol Gyfun Cwm Rhymni would be at full capacity at this point. The informal consultation process had begun with regard to the Rhymney 3-18 site and Phase 1 of the Secondary Rationalisation programme would be progressed.

It was noted that the rationalisation programme would be geographically based and would initially look at schools, informally consult and seek views of those affected and consider the range of options available in that area before moving forward. Further reports would be brought back to Council and Members of this Committee. Members were advised that there would also be review of Primary Schools in order to monitor the position in the long term.

Officers confirmed that there was a formal consultation process laid down by Welsh Government regarding any school closure and this was detailed for Member's information.

The factors that would be taken into account in relation to a school closure were outlined and Officer's confirmed that surplus place would only be one of those taken into account, condition, suitability, sustainability and projected pupil numbers would also be taken into consideration.

Clarification was sought in relation to projected pupils numbers and Officer's confirmed the accuracy and origin of the figures used in making the projections.

Members agreed that surplus places should be a priority going forward if successful outcomes for pupils were to be assured.

The Scrutiny Committee fully considered and noted the recommendations and draft action plan.

The Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning thanked the Officers for all the work done during the inspection and for the time and effort taken in this evening presentation. The work required to improve standards particularly at KS3 and KS4 were acknowledged and Members were assured of the commitment to drive this forward.

The Chairman and Members thanked Officer's for all their hard work and effects in producing and presenting the inspection report and draft action plan.

The meeting closed at 19:28 p.m.

Approved as a correct record, and subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 16th January 2013, they were signed by the Chair.

CHAIRMAN