

THURROCK COUNCIL

A REVIEW OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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Introduction

I have been asked initially by Malcolm Newsam, interim Director of Children, Education and Families and then by Jo Olsson substantive Director of Children, Education and Families to review the effectiveness of school improvement services in Thurrock and to propose options for the future in the light of local and national policy priorities and to take account of the proposals in the June 2009 White Paper 'Your child, your schools, our future'.

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Background

1. Few areas of national policy have been subject to more changes of direction over the last 20 years than that of the relationship between local authorities and schools. The pendulum has swung between encouraging competition between schools to promoting collaboration, and thinking has oscillated between propounding the primacy of schools standing alone with only the most minimal contact with their council, through intervention in inverse proportion to success, to using councils as the agencies of the highly interventionist National Strategies. None of this has been conducive to supporting schools or councils to think long term about the nature of the support schools need locally, and jointly to plan how that might be organised and paid for.
2. There is however much to be positive about. Local communities generally expect their local council to play a part in holding local schools to account and in ensuring that enough good schools are available for all. Many schools and their local councils have continued to work together in an atmosphere of positive partnership and many schools have valued and continue to value being part of their wider community. Bringing all the services that support local children and their families together is generally seen as having the potential better to assist schools in getting the support they need for children in difficulty.
3. The greatest proportion of the resources for school improvement are now delegated to schools, or are held by central government through their various programmes of intervention- National Strategies, National Challenge, Gaining Ground to name but three. Where local councils have preserved a significant capacity in school improvement it is usually by persuading schools to pool money to enhance what money the council is able to retain for this purpose, by extensive trading with schools, or through imaginative use of national resources delegated to them. Few if any local councils can now offer a comprehensive programme of support to schools totally from their in house resources- almost all use variations on a model of a core team which provides some support and with other specialist support commissioned either from partner organisations or from known individuals with expertise.
4. There are very few instances of councils collaborating with each other to organise school improvement services. Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin have a joint school improvement service and the four councils in the area of the former Mid- Glamorgan County Council set up a joint Education and Schools Improvement Service [ESIS]. In other areas there are informal arrangements to share staff expertise and several councils have structured arrangements with a private sector provider of school improvement and advisory services of which there are several. Some councils, either voluntarily

or through intervention from the Department of Children, Schools and Families [DCSF], source all their school improvement functions externally mostly from the private sector.

5. Whatever shape the future of school improvement takes, it seems likely to be based on even more delegation of funding to schools, on encouraging schools to look widely for appropriate support, on promoting a wide range of providers of support, on more structured national quality assurance for support and on a very limited role for councils as providers of services. It is therefore very timely to look at what the council role in school improvement might be.
6. There is a very wide range of organisations and individuals offering support and advice to schools. What is not always clear is how well assured the quality may be. Secondary schools for example can rely on the Specialist Schools and Academy Trust [SSAT] to assure the quality of support they offer as does National College for Leadership in Schools and Children's Services [NCLSCS previously known as NCSL]. It is not however easy for an individual head teacher or their School Improvement Partner [SIP] or their local council adviser if they have one, to find the level of full quality assurance they need.
7. So there is already a perceptible area where schools might welcome more structured support from the Council. There is also a high likelihood that as schools respond to the new agenda for collaboration, partnerships, trusts and federations that they will identify similar needs- there could well be a natural role for the Council in commissioning programmes of support for schools working together.

Implications of the White Paper.

8. The White Paper 'Your child, your school, our future' sets out the current government's view about further changes to the school system and to the relationships between schools and between schools and councils. The White Paper lays a heavy emphasis on schools working together in partnership and promotes a range of collaborative models making more extensive use of existing legal arrangements for federations, trusts, executive headships and academy sponsorship alongside less formal arrangements for clustering, behaviour and attendance partnerships and extended school arrangements. So the overall message is that the future is about schools working together, learning from each other and taking joint responsibility for promoting high attainment for all pupils in the communities they serve.

9. The DCSF will cease to provide or fund the provision of school improvement support from April 2011. DCSF will ensure that there is a sufficient supply of quality assured improvement support, across the country to meet the needs of schools. These arrangements will include;
 - Creating a network of improvement support frameworks to identify quality-assured providers of support on important aspects of schools' responsibilities across all five of the 'Every Child Matters' outcomes. Existing and new providers could apply to be included. There will be no central funding for these providers- it will be for individual schools to choose and pay for the right provider advised by their SIP with the national framework providing the assurance of quality.
 - Supporting high performing schools- such as National and Local Leaders of Education- to provide school to school support to their peers either locally through partnership arrangements or nationally
 - Monitoring whether all areas have access to enough support and where there are gaps DCSF will work with schools and councils to commission new and existing providers to develop and offer the necessary programmes.
10. The current Government is also planning to expand the 'Improving Schools Programme' into 40 more areas and the Leading Teacher programme will be expanded. Some local councils will be funded in each region to become 'priority learning' local councils developing and sharing effective practice for working with schools facing particular circumstances with each local council tackling a different issue.
11. The funding currently devoted to the various national programmes that will be terminated at the end of their contracts will be delegated to schools. This could provide a significant additional sum for schools to spend- the corollary of course is that funding to local councils through the National Strategies will also cease thus potentially very significantly reducing the staffing and expertise available at local level.
12. The role of the School Improvement Partner is to be further enhanced with a new role to act as commissioner of support for the school. Once the school and the SIP have identified its development needs the SIP will be charged with putting together whatever package of external support the school needs using this new national network of accredited support providers. The school and the SIP will be free to seek support from wherever they consider appropriate and need not be confined to local providers.
13. Local councils are encouraged to commission clear and costed menus of support for school improvement across the five 'Every Child Matters'

outcomes from which schools and SIPs can draw. These menus of support will need to reflect local schools' performance with different groups of pupils. 'This commissioning and brokering of support should increasingly replace the employment of local consultants so that schools can access the most appropriate support, regardless of provider' White Paper Para 4.13.

14. The role of local councils in intervening in schools in categories or otherwise causing concern is to be maintained and strengthened but new Accredited Schools Groups are to be established. The White Paper seems to envisage local authorities calling in one of these groups when a school goes into a category rather than as present taking the lead in putting an improvement plan together. So the role of the local council will again be a monitoring and commissioning one, rather than leading direct intervention.
15. It is not altogether clear what role any national Conservative administration might see for councils in school improvement. Although the broad policy thrust seems to be about autonomy and accountability for individual schools it is rarely safe completely to rely on pre-election thoughts and publications. But it seems unlikely from the overall picture emerging about policy direction that they will envisage a major service delivery role for local councils. A continuing role in school place planning and a supervisory oversight of standards are likely to continue as part of the published commitment to local rather than national oversight of services and to local people making the key decisions for their communities.

Implications for councils.

16. Whatever the outcome of the next General Election it does not seem likely therefore to lead to a revival of large scale local council advisory and school support services. The future role of councils in school improvement seems most likely to include:
 - Recruitment and support of a group of SIPS
 - Monitoring the overall performance of schools
 - Creating a framework for schools to be more ambitious for pupil achievement and attainment which will result in significant improvements to individual and collective performance
 - Brokering local partnerships between schools especially to ensure better achievement of the ECM outcomes

- Commissioning a menu of school support services attuned to the needs of schools and the local community
 - Commissioning appropriate support for schools in categories or otherwise causing concern
 - Promoting new types of schools through partnerships with different providers.
17. While all of these roles require local knowledge, insight and relationships to be delivered effectively, all of them have elements that could be delivered in partnership with other local councils or other partners. Indeed many of these roles could be delivered in alliance with others as this could make the process of commissioning more effective- many providers of services find bidding for work with central and local government to be expensive as the compliance regimes are rightly very demanding. One way through this is to have contracts for services that are large enough to make the investment in the bidding process worthwhile. Some of these issues may be dealt with through the proposed national framework of quality assurance but that is not yet fully described enough to assess that.
18. So the most likely model for the future for a local council is that it will have a small core team which monitors individual and collective school performance not just on attainment but on all the ECM outcomes. That team will include a liaison point for SIPs, a capacity to promote and monitor local inter school partnership working to ensure that schools are learning from each other, a commissioning team which analyses local school improvement needs and which structures that into a menu of support activities and a capacity to manage and commission intervention in schools where intervention is required.

Pupil attainment in Thurrock.

19. There are currently 55 schools in Thurrock, 10 secondary 11-16 schools, including two 11-18 academies, 43 infant, junior and primary schools and 2 special schools.
20. The pupil population is growing and the area is a key part of the Thames Gateway development and should continue to grow over the next few years. The ethnic composition of the area is also changing with significant new communities developing whose needs should be identified and met.
21. Although performance in secondary schools is below the national average, the rate of improvement in most secondary schools is very good and there are some very high performers.

22. In the early years and the primary sector by contrast attainment is a cause for very serious concern. The appendices to this paper set out an analysis of performance data from 2007 to the unvalidated 2009 picture. The position is very patchy. There are some areas and some schools where performance overall is improving as well as in some or all key subjects. There are most worryingly though many schools and curriculum areas where attainment is static or falling. Improvements in performance nationally at Key Stage One and Two are slowing or ceasing but it is the reductions in the number of pupils in Thurrock attaining national norms that must be a cause for serious concern especially since overall performance is well below national norms.

School Improvement Services in Thurrock

23. The Council has publicly stated high ambitions for improving the social and economic prosperity of the community. These cannot be achieved without a network of high performing schools. The mission of the Schools Provision team in the Directorate is to raise educational aspiration, expectation and achievement.
24. The School Improvement team in the Directorate is supported by four full time and one part time [0.6] Principal Officers Pupil Attainment [POPA], by four National Strategy Consultants [Primary] and six National Strategy consultants [Secondary]. The National Strategy consultants are funded by DCSF; this funding will cease on 31 March 2011.
25. Each of the Principal Officers has a leadership role for aspects of school improvement. These lead roles cover National Strategies, Behaviour and Attendance, Pupil Assessment, Governor Support, Continuing Professional Development and management development, Inclusion, and Schools Causing Concern. In addition to these borough wide roles four of the Principal Officers are link advisers to schools and to the clusters of schools. Each of these Principal Officers works direct to the Head of School Provision along with a number of other senior managers.
26. The current structure has a number of weaknesses. The leadership roles are seen as a matrix which makes both individual leadership and accountability difficult to deliver and there was significant confusion about roles and responsibilities. The general support role for schools in the past has not clearly been defined or costed in terms of time or priority so schools got very different patterns of support and the POPA team found it difficult to focus on the real priorities. This issue has begun to be addressed by the new more

differentiated approach to supporting schools according to a consistent analysis of their needs which is a very welcome development.

27. There is a strong case for reviewing the leadership and management structure. The Head of Schools Provision is the direct line manager of the POPA team as well as having a significant number of other senior managers reporting to her. It would be very helpful to have an interim Head of School Improvement to lead and manage the school improvement functions of the Council, reporting to a senior manager on the Directorate management team and, in view of the importance of the issues, with a direct link to the Director in order to ensure the right level of rapid change and to lead forward the stronger focus on effective strategic planning and delivery of school improvement. Whether that role needs to be permanent will depend upon the amount of impact over the next six months.
28. Strategic planning for school improvement is not secure. The Council's corporate ambitions for a well educated community are admirably clear. For these ambitions to be realised pupils particularly in primary schools have to make much more rapid improvement in attainment levels that has been the case for the last three years. The Council has a key role to play in looking at trends, identifying those schools where improvement for pupils is not happening fast enough or indeed at all, in taking a systematic approach to helping those schools improve, and the Council ought also to be spurring on those who are doing well to do even better.
29. For that to happen the Council and its schools need to be clear about what the priorities are, what the expectations are, what resources are to be made available and what all parties think success will look like. This approach needs to be supported by an agreed strategic plan for improving pupil attainment which sets out actions, expected outcomes, performance measures and a framework for accountability. No such plan exists. The Council's approach is not set out in a single accessible document but is rather to be deduced from a range of plans and policies, some recent and some dating back to 2006, and has also to be inferred from the actions and priorities of teams and individuals. That does not mean that the Council is not well informed about the progress of schools- the data available is clear and well organised. And the strengths and weaknesses of individual schools are often well described. But the absence of a prioritised and agreed plan means that the team and the Directorate as a whole is not having the concerted effect on pupil attainment that it needs to have.

Engagement of schools.

30. Schools in Thurrock are grouped into clusters which are based on localities though there is also an Excellence Cluster [arising from the Excellence in Cities initiative] which works across the borough. These clusters are self managing and although some staff in the Directorate attend cluster meetings from time to time there is no automatic right to attend even for the Principal Officer who is the nominated link to the cluster. Reviewing the effectiveness of the clusters was not part of the brief and nor has there been an opportunity to talk to school leaders about the quality of the relationship with schools. What is clear is that the opportunity for school leaders and governors formally to contribute to the development of a service wide strategic agenda for improvement have in the past been limited. The Council is now creating a forum where key strategic issues can be discussed with school representatives so that the necessary strategy can be developed in partnership. This is especially important as from April 2011 the significant majority of resources for school improvement will be delegated to schools and if those resources are in any way to be pooled for collective benefit, school representatives and the Schools Forum will be key to any positive outcome.

What will be the Council's role for the future?

31. The future statutory core role for councils in school improvement is outlined in Para 16 above. That role will not be easy to deliver within the current organisational framework for school improvement. The Council's work in school improvement lacks ambition and focus, the partnership with schools to deliver better pupil attainment does not seem secure and there is a lack of clarity about leadership roles and accountabilities. A new school improvement plan needs urgently to be developed which is adequately resourced and which sets out the priorities for the Principal Officers in terms of their allocation of time and attention. Such tight prioritisation will be unfamiliar to many in the Directorate and schools and will therefore need strong and clear sighted leadership from the Director and the leadership team if the necessary cultural change is to be achieved.

32. The Council will need to consider how this new core role is to be delivered. Many smaller councils have already moved to a position where they retain a small core of staff who lead the school improvement function, work with schools to set the collective priorities, create the annual school improvement

plan and provide leadership for and liaise with School Improvement Partners [SIPs], and work closely with schools causing concern. But for such councils programmes of support and intervention are normally commissioned by the core team from a range of sources either through a formal partnership with an external partner, or through an annual service agreement or by using a group of trusted experts or indeed by a combination of these things.

33. Such an approach could work well for Thurrock and would leave you well placed to manage the position after April 2011.
34. The Accredited Provider role is a further complication. The June 2009 White Paper sets out an expectation that schools will set out their improvement needs and that their SIP will commission any external support that they need. There is a parallel expectation that councils will pull together the analysis of school support needs across all schools in the area and commission programmes of support from the new Accredited Providers. However schools and their SIPs are not under any obligation to use the programme that the Council might have commissioned on their behalf and will be free to use any Accredited Provider they wish. Unless therefore schools locally can be persuaded to engage fully in the needs analysis and commissioning process much of the Council's work could be entirely nugatory. In the Thurrock context where significant collective improvement is required I would recommend that vigorous efforts are made to persuade schools through the Schools Forum to look to support the Council in commissioning a local programme of school improvement activities and programmes.
35. It is highly unlikely that the Council will be able from within its current team to deliver the full range of school improvement programmes to its schools as an Accredited Provider and given the trading nature of the relationship it may well not want to take the commercial risk involved in doing so. Any such team would have to be small as well as multi skilled. In any small team credibility often flows from the individual rather than the team so viability can be very dependent on retaining key staff. So in looking to the future of the Accredited Provider role I would recommend a partnership approach. There are two main options- to seek a public sector approach which might involve forming an Accredited Provider with other local councils in the area selling services both to local schools and more widely and your geographical location with good access to London, Essex, Hertfordshire, and Kent is promising for such a venture. The other main option would be to form a partnership with one of the larger private sector service providers which might be interested in recruiting local staff with credibility in return for a medium term agreement to be the preferred Accredited Provider. Those discussions need to be taking place in parallel with creating a strong core role within the Council.

Conclusions

36. Pupils in Thurrock are not making the sustained increases in their attainment that they need to make if the area is to continue to develop and prosper. Primary schools in particular demonstrate significant increases and reductions in pupil performance between subject areas and year groups and the number of primary schools where there has been sustained improvement over several years is very small. The principal responsibility for school improvement rests with school governors and school leaders. But they need strong political and professional strategic leadership from the Council. The Council has a major role in helping schools to work together effectively, in creating a single strategic framework to achieve improvement, in ensuring that the resources available are well directed in support of agreed priorities and in offering coordinated and systematic advice, support and challenge to schools. The Council's current approach involves much hard work by committed staff and can demonstrate some areas where there has been positive intervention. But those have not been part of a systematic agreed approach supported by shared priorities and have been too dependent on personal influence and individual credibility- those are important but cannot be an effective substitute for a collective sense of priority and focus.
37. A new strategic focus on school improvement is urgently needed. In partnership with schools the Council must set out what needs to be done over the next few months so that all partners can be ready to meet the challenge of further delegation of resources to schools from April 2011. It needs to look at what can be done this school year to secure improvement in Years 5 and 6 and what needs to be done to ensure that secondary schools are ready for the attainment levels of their Year 7 intake in September 2010. It then needs to set out collective priorities and programmes for action for the next three years which will deliver significant and secure improvement in pupil performance across all age ranges.
38. The Directorate leadership team needs also to review if it is having enough collective impact across the service and to assess how it provides collaborative as well as individual leadership. There needs to be a culture of shared leadership and accountability for solving problems, raising expectations and improving performance.

Recommendations

39. I would make the following recommendations;

- A. That developments in school improvement services and the clear strategic direction for improvement be managed in partnership with school representatives through the new representative structures
- B. That a Pupil Attainment Plan be developed for the next three years which sets out shared ambitions to improve outcomes for pupils at each key stage, the steps by which these are to be achieved, the roles and responsibilities of school and Directorate leaders, defines the support programmes to be developed, sets out the criteria by which they are to be accessed, sets out how they are to be funded and how the outcomes are to be monitored and evaluated.
- C. That the Council appoint an interim Head of School Improvement to increase the capacity of the Directorate to provide strategic leadership for this key function.
- D. That the Council creates a structure for school improvement services which will enable it to deliver the new statutory core role.
- E. That the Council consults with schools about which of the additional services currently provided by the Principal Officers Pupil Attainment should continue and how they should be funded.
- F. That the Council creates a structure for commissioning school improvement services for schools from April 2011 in partnership with schools.
- G. That the Council reviews with schools what kind of relationship there ought to be with the new Accredited Providers.